

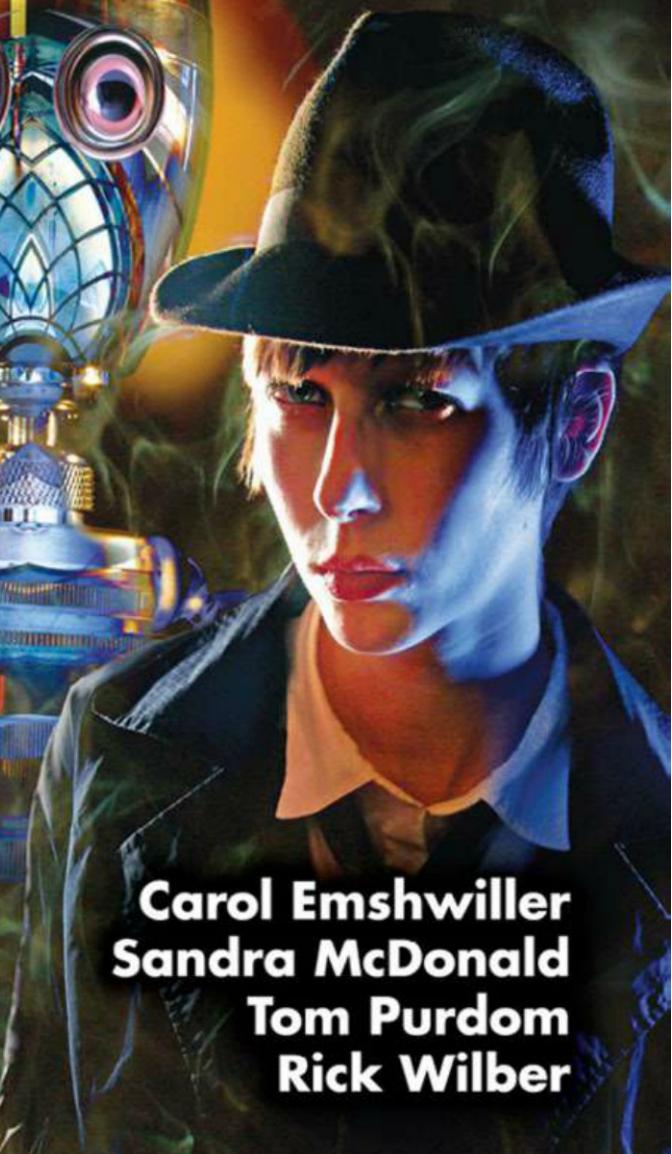
Double Issue

# Asimov's

## SCIENCE FICTION®

APRIL/MAY 2012

**The Last  
Judgment**  
James Patrick  
Kelly



**Carol Emshwiller  
Sandra McDonald  
Tom Purdom  
Rick Wilber**

ON SALE UNTIL 4/3

[www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com)

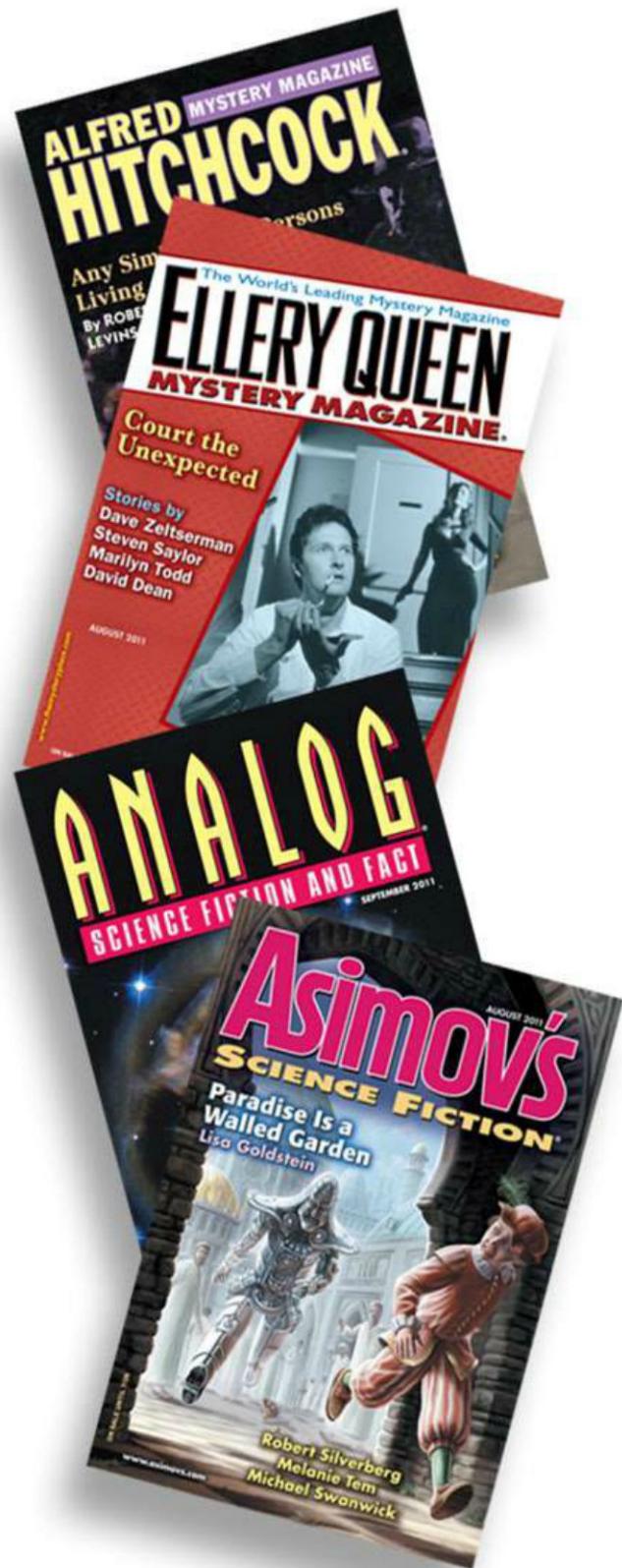
# Advertise in our digital magazines on iPad!

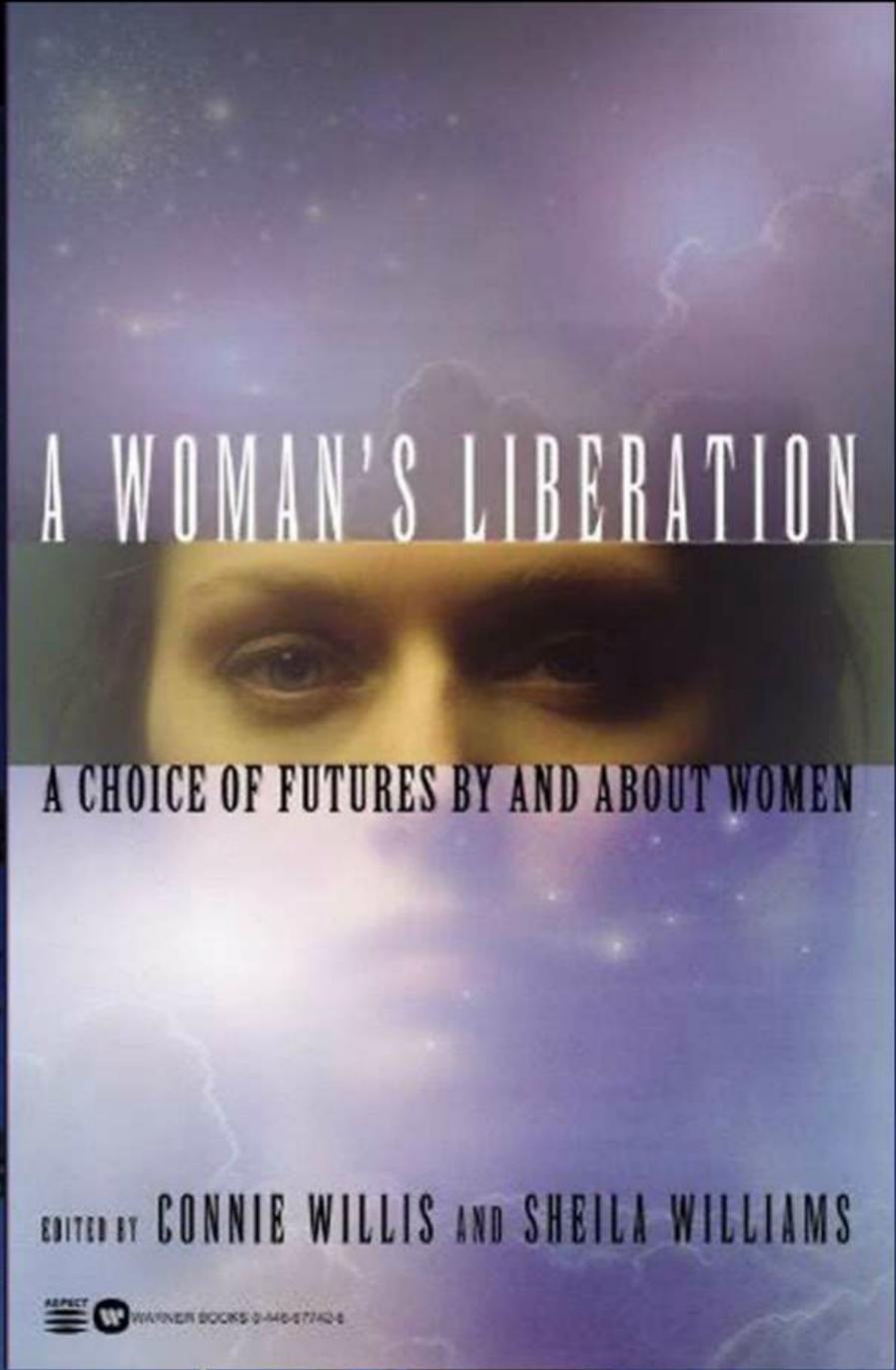
Penny Publications, LLC, the parent company of Dell Magazines, offers digital advertisers a desirable, highly-responsive audience.

We publish **5 nationally recognized, award-winning digital magazines.**



For more information on advertising with us contact Robin DiMeglio via email at [printadvertising@dellmagazines.com](mailto:printadvertising@dellmagazines.com) or call 203.866.6688, x180.



A woman's face is centered in a starry, purple-hued sky. Lightning bolts streak across the background, and a bright light source is visible behind her eye. The image is framed by a dark border.

# A WOMAN'S LIBERATION

A CHOICE OF FUTURES BY AND ABOUT WOMEN

EDITED BY CONNIE WILLIS AND SHEILA WILLIAMS



WARNER BOOKS 0-446-57742-6

**Order your copy!**

[CLICK HERE](#)

# Asimov's

SCIENCE FICTION

## NOVELLAS

---

10 THE LAST JUDGMENT ..... JAMES PATRICK KELLY  
134 LIVING IN THE EIGHTIES ..... DAVID IRA CLEARY

## NOVELETTE

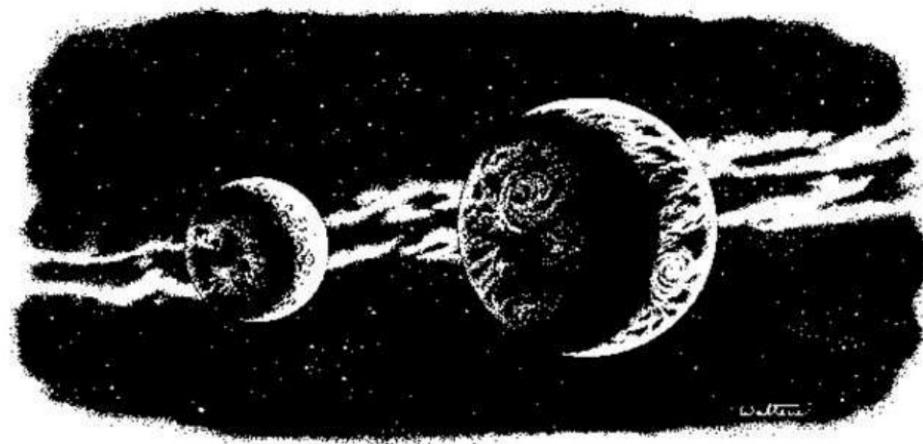
---

94 SOMETHING REAL ..... RICK WILBER

## SHORT STORIES

---

50 BONDING WITH MORRY ..... TOM PURDOM  
60 SEXY ROBOT MOM ..... SANDRA McDONALD  
72 SENSITIVE, COMPARTMENTED ..... GRAY RINEHART  
85 SOUVENIRS ..... IAN CREASEY  
112 GREENER ..... JOSH ROSEMAN  
124 RIDING RED TED AND  
BREATHING FIRE ..... CAROL EMSHWILLER



APRIL/MAY 2012

Vol. 36 Nos. 4 & 5  
(Whole Numbers 435 & 436)

Next Issue on Sale April 3, 2012

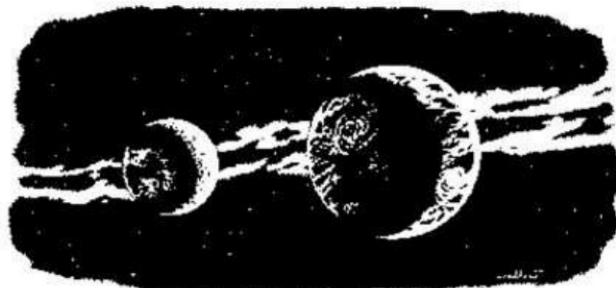
Cover Art by J. K. Potter  
for "The Last Judgment"

## POETRY

**9** BOOK WYRM ..... ROBERT BORSKI  
**93** THE MUSIC OF PARTICLE PHYSICS ..... BRUCE BOSTON  
**111** TACHYONS ..... GEOFFREY A. LANDIS  
**133** APOCALYPTIC LOVE SONG ..... MEGAN ARKENBERG

## DEPARTMENTS

**4** EDITORIAL: VIVE LA DIFFÉRENCE! ..... SHEILA WILLIAMS  
**6** REFLECTIONS:  
As Slow as Possible ..... ROBERT SILVERBERG  
**123** NEXT ISSUE .....  
**182** ON BOOKS: ALTERNATE REALITIES ..... NORMAN SPINRAD  
**192** THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR ... ERWIN S. STRAUSS



*Asimov's Science Fiction*. ISSN 1065-2698. Vol. 36, Nos. 4 & 5. Whole Nos. 435 & 436, April/May 2012. GST #R123293128. Published monthly except for two combined double issues in April/May and October/November by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. One year subscription \$55.90 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries \$65.90 (GST included in Canada), payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscription and all other correspondence about them, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Address for all editorial matters: *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 267 Broadway, 4th Floor, New York, N.Y. 10007. *Asimov's Science Fiction* is the registered trademark of Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. © 2012 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. Please visit our website, [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com), for information regarding electronic submissions. All manual submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; the publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER, send change of address to *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. In Canada return to Quad/Graphics Joncas, 4380 Garand, Saint-Laurent, Quebec H4R 2A3.

Printed by Quad/Graphics, Taunton, MA U.S.A. (2/6/12)



## VIVE LA DIFFÉRENCE!

Last June, I invited readers of *Asimov's* digital editions to write in and let me know their thoughts on the electronic reading experience. The magazine has been available in digital form since the late nineties. Early adopters could purchase *Asimov's* for PalmPilots and other PDAs. While access to electronic copies of the magazine sounded like an exciting idea, initial subscriptions began as a trickle and stayed statistically insignificant for ten years. The number of digital subscriptions sold didn't start to move upward until they became available on Amazon's Kindle in late 2008. Sales have grown steadily and quickly since then. A third of our readers now purchase downloads of the magazine for the Nook, Nook Color, the iPad, all sorts of Kindles, and various other e-readers. We have lots of new readers along with some long-time subscribers who are changing how they take their *Asimov's*. Reading is reading, but I thought it would be fun and informative to find out what readers most enjoyed about the digital format.

I received lots of constructive comments about formatting and subscription problems that I've passed along to the proper departments. I also received a lot of great comments about our digital anthology, *Enter a Future*. Unfortunately, I don't have room to quote those readers. I don't even have room to quote from everyone who wrote in about why they appreciated their electronic subscriptions, but I have been able to pull together a sampling of some of those remarks.

Paul Cornell likes the look of his digital magazine and the ease with which he can maneuver around the stories: "I very much enjoy the *Asimov's* experience on the iPad (via Zinio). It's all in color, for a start, with a weblinked contents page, so I can hop straight to the story I'm after.

And there's something that satisfies my OCD soul about the little gallery of covers that builds up over a year."

Handy storage was also a plus for Tom Krolick, who sent us the following directly from his Nook Color: "Oh, no! I am a month behind on reading my *Asimov's* magazine. Uh, nevermind. I subscribe digitally so it really doesn't matter when I get to it. You see, they are all right here, current and past issues, all at my fingertips! I wouldn't have it any other way."

Easy access to an *Asimov's* subscription was another positive aspect of the digital format. Annelie Gallea of Albuquerque, New Mexico, pointed out: "As I am on the road every month, my little Sony comes in handy. I subscribe now and love it! What convenience! I can take this with me anywhere. I'm just as excited to get the latest issue via computer as I ever was when my magazine came in the mailbox."

Dennis Rockwell of Concord, Massachusetts, agrees about the ease of subscription renewal. "Due to an oversight (kids, life, job, the usual) my paper subscription to *Asimov's* lapsed a while back and I didn't notice until things lightened up and I worked through my backlog. I'm greedily buying back issues through *ereader.com*. So, thanks for being a pioneer! I'm happy to be catching up at last!"

From his mobile phone, Ron Porter let us know how much he too appreciates his access to issues of the magazine. Although he's not a subscriber, he tells us: "I'd been getting the paper version of single issues of *Asimov's* pretty much forever, but I switched once the magazine was available electronically. That was partly driven by the increasing difficulty of finding *Asimov's* on the newsstand, but it quickly became my preferred format for most of my reading. I've always managed to keep reading material close to hand,

# Asimov's®

SCIENCE FICTION

but now it's not just close, it's always right with me. I'll probably never keep my reading material on a dedicated reader, because they're no more portable than 'the real thing.' My Android phone is still no match for a paper book or even the Kindle, but portability trumps everything else. There is still nothing like pulling out something to read on the spur of the moment when faced with an unexpected delay. I won't go so far as to say it's changed my life, but it's certainly changed my relationship with lines and doctors' offices."

Although she also appreciates the convenience, Mary Robinette Kowal nailed the gist of my original question when she explained why she enjoys the very act of reading on an electronic device: "Since I switched to reading on the Nook, I've found that it is a transparent experience. I don't notice the differences between electronic and paper until I return to reading on paper and then I'm often annoyed by how awkward it is. Simple things like needing to use two hands to read. I also adore the fact that the new issue just automagically appears on my Nook. There is something wonderful about reading an SF magazine on a device that, in my youth, used to be science fiction itself." Mary adds, "Frequently, when I'm out, I'll read *Asimov's* via the Nook app for my phone. It's great when I'm stuck in a long line, or have an unexpected wait, to be able to pull out the magazine without having remembered to pack it that morning."

I'm still a big fan of the paper editions of *Asimov's*, as are two thirds of you. I enjoy handling the physical copies of the magazine. I love looking at my shelves of paper issues and I like having the ability to pass along copies of *Asimov's* to veterans' organizations, hospitals, and SF conventions. As one reader mentioned, the original product needs no batteries (or recharging). Yet, I enjoy reading magazines on my own Kindle for many of the same reasons pointed out by these readers. I'm glad that *Asimov's* is available in so many different formats. Reading is reading, but vive la différence! □

**SHEILA WILLIAMS**  
Editor

**TREVOR QUACHRI**  
Managing Editor

**MARY GRANT**  
Editorial Assistant

**EMILY HOCKADAY**  
Editorial Administrative Assistant

**JAYNE KEISER**  
Typesetting Director

**SUZANNE LEMKE**  
Assistant Typesetting Manager

**KEVIN DORIS**  
Senior Typesetter

**VICTORIA GREEN**  
Senior Art Director

**CINDY TIBERI**  
Production Artist

**LAURA TULLEY**  
Senior Production Manager

**JENNIFER CONE**  
Production Associate

**ABIGAIL BROWNING**  
Manager Subsidiary Rights and Marketing

**TERRIE POLY**  
Digital Publishing Manager

**SANDY MARLOWE**  
Circulation Services

## ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE

**ROBIN DIMEGLIO**

Advertising Sales Manager

Tel: (203) 866-6688 ext.180 Fax: (203) 854-5962  
printadvertising@dellmagazines.com  
(Display and Classified Advertising)

**Subscriber Services:** 203-866-6688 Option #2

**PETER KANTER**  
Publisher

**BRUCE W. SHERBOW**  
Senior Vice President, Sales and Marketing

**CHRISTINE BEGLEY**  
Vice President, Editorial and Product Development

**SUSAN MANGAN**  
Vice President, Design and Production

**ISAAC ASIMOV**  
Editorial Director (1977-1992)

**Stories from *Asimov's* have won 53 Hugos and 27 Nebula Awards, and our editors have received 19 Hugo Awards for Best Editor.**

Please do not send us your manuscript until you've gotten a copy of our guidelines. Look for them online at [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com) or send us a self-addressed, stamped business-size (#10) envelope, and a note requesting this information. Write "manuscript guidelines" in the bottom left-hand corner of the outside envelope. We prefer electronic submissions, but the address for manual submissions and for all editorial correspondence is *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 267 Broadway, Fourth Floor, New York, NY 10007-2352. While we're always looking for new writers, please, in the interest of time-saving, find out what we're looking for, and how to prepare it, before submitting your story.

## AS SLOW AS POSSIBLE

We SF people like to think of ourselves as being capable of taking the long view. It is a routine matter for us to contemplate the state of things in the year 3914, or 39,914, or even, for those among us who have the true Stapledonian outlook about futurity, the year 3,914,914,914. (If you wonder what the phrase "Stapledonian outlook" means, check out Olaf Stapledon's great novels *Last and First Men* and *Starmaker*, which I discussed here a couple of years ago. You have never read anything like them.)

Familiar as we are with the grand stretch of futurity, it should be easy enough for us to become willing participants in a musical concert that's not expected to end until the year 2640. You will, I have to warn you, reconcile yourself to the fact that you have already missed almost a dozen years of the performance. It began on September 5, 2001. But since it will take 639 years to perform the whole piece, you still have time to catch quite a bit of the show, although I very much doubt that anybody will last long enough to hear the whole thing.

The place is Halberstadt, Germany, a town a couple of hours' journey southwest of Berlin. The composer is John Cage. The name of the piece is—well, what did you think?—"As Slow As Possible." It consists of eight movements, of which at least one, according to the composer's instructions, must be repeated. Cage didn't specify the tempo of performance, leaving that up to the performer; in this particular performance, each movement is to last seventy-one years. So—eight plus one, times seventy-one—a 639-year concert. Be patient. Be very, very patient.

John Cage, who lived from 1912 to 1992, was an amiable but very radical avant-garde composer whose previously most notorious composition was not nearly as lengthy: "4'33'" is what it was called, and the score instructs the per-

formers (any number can play) to remain utterly silent for the entire duration of the piece, four minutes and thirty-three seconds. The idea, I believe, is that fortuitous sounds occurring during the performance, a cough in the audience or the rustling of papers or the passing of an airplane overhead, will provide the actual "music," and we are expected to interpret that pattern of random sounds in any way we wish. Cage, a student of Oriental philosophy and a considerable philosopher in his own right, believed strongly in the role of randomness in the arts, and was fond of leaving many factors to chance in his compositions.

"4'33'" is, as I said, notorious, and for good reason. But I would not want you to think that Cage was a mere thumb-to-the-nose producer of gimmicky high-concept outrageousness. Much twentieth-century music strikes the uninitiated listener as mere strident noise, scratchy screechy stuff without melodic interest or discernible pattern; but Cage was concerned as much with aural beauty as with abstract principles of composition. Such works as his *Sonatas and Interludes* for prepared piano (1946-1948) are works of great beauty indeed, delicate and lovely to hear, fascinating to the mind. (A "prepared" piano is one that has had various odds and ends, bits of metal and wooden blocks and such, tied to its strings, producing a strange but pleasing twanging sound.) I like to think that Bach and Mozart and Beethoven would have had no difficulty discerning the beauty in these sonatas and interludes, once they had taken a moment to assimilate the idea of a prepared piano and another to comprehend Cage's theoretical assumptions. "He's operating by different rules," they would, most likely, say, "but what glorious sounds these are! Play a little more of it for me."

He composed "As Slow As Possible" in

1985, and revised it for organ in 1987. The score is just eight pages long. Cage's preferred tempo for the piece is implicit in its title: "As Slow As Possible." And he did request that one of the eight movements be repeated, the choice of movement being left up to the performing artist. Other than that, he placed no limitations on the individual performer. Since it was composed originally to be played during a piano competition, and the judges would have to hear it over and over again, he wanted to spare them the monotony of hearing a sequence of identical performances by guaranteeing that no two performances would be alike. It seems to have been his expectation that a typical performance would last from twenty to seventy minutes, depending on the performer's choice of tempo.

The idea of a 639-year performance arose among a group of Cage's admirers a few years after his death. The choice of duration of the concert may seem to have a Cagian randomness about it, but that is not so. In his great book *Syntagma Musicum* (1614-18), the seventeenth-century composer and music theorist Michael Praetorius asserted that the first organ using the modern twelve-note keyboard was built for the cathedral of Halberstadt in 1361. That organ, had it survived, would have been 639 years old in the year 2000, and so it seemed appropriate to the Cage crowd to celebrate the anniversary of its construction by using Halberstadt as the site of a 639-year-long performance of *As Slow As Possible*.

The Halberstadt cathedral itself was unavailable for the performance, for the practical reason that continuous organ sounds spanning the next seven centuries would probably distract the worshippers from the regular services. The site chosen instead was St. Burchardi Church, which was one of the oldest in the city. It had been built about 1050 as a Cistercian convent, was partly destroyed in war six hundred years later, rebuilt in 1711, and eventually deconsecrated and used as a barn and a distillery before being rediscovered and re-

stored. For the Cage performance a new organ, built along the lines of the 1361 original, was constructed. And the performance itself began on September 5, 2001, which would have been John Cage's eighty-ninth birthday.

The organ was still under construction that day, but that was no drawback to starting the performance, because Cage's score specifies that *As Slow As Possible* is to open with a lengthy period of silence. At the tempo chosen for the Halberstadt performance, that opening "rest" had a duration of seventeen months. So, though September 5, 2001 marked the official start of the playing of the piece, the first audible music wasn't heard until February 5, 2003: a chord consisting of two G-sharps with a B between them.

That chord needed to be sustained until July 5, 2004. (All changes of sound take place on the 5th of the month, because Cage was born on that day of September 1912.) Of course, no organist can be expected to hold a chord non-stop from February of one year to July of the next, so little bags of sand were affixed to weigh the organ pedals down and keep the chord playing continuously. The church's neighbors weren't so happy about having a single sustained organ chord coming from the building for month after month, either, and after some complaints were registered the organ was enclosed in a plexiglass case to cut the sound emerging from the church down to a faint whine.

And so the performance has gone ever since: a change of note on January 5, 2006, another one a mere four months later on May 5, 2006, the next one on July 5, 2008, and so on and on and on (November 5, 2008, February 5, 2009, July 5, 2010 . . .) until the performance reaches its triumphant conclusion on September 5, 2640. The work of building the organ went on during the early years, pipes being added as required by the score; the instrument was not completed until 2009.

Devotees of Cage's music make pilgrimages to St. Burchardi to follow the progress of the event. The biggest crowds show up for each chord change, of course.

I imagine that to be a memorable thing, sudden tonal alteration after months or even years of unvarying sound—but the church is open six days a week and anyone can visit at any time during the performance. (Much as I admire Cage's music myself, I doubt that I'm going to get there. The performance has 629 years to run as I write this, but I don't.)

Music-lovers who are too impatient to sit through the entire Halberstadt production do get opportunities to experience *As Slow As Possible* at a faster pace. The organist Joe Drew played it in a mere twenty-four hours during an arts festival in 2008; he has also performed it at paces of nine and twelve hours, and—an iron man, Drew is!—is currently planning a forty-eight-hour version. And on February 5, 2009, Diane Luchese performed it at Towson University in Baltimore in a single swoop that began at 8:45 in the morning and lasted until 11:41 at night—fourteen hours and fifty-six minutes. For those in a *real* hurry, there's a CD of the piece available that whizzes through it in a brisk seventy-five minutes. That's in keeping with Cage's original concept, but I suspect

that true Halberstadt acolytes regard such haste as deplorable.

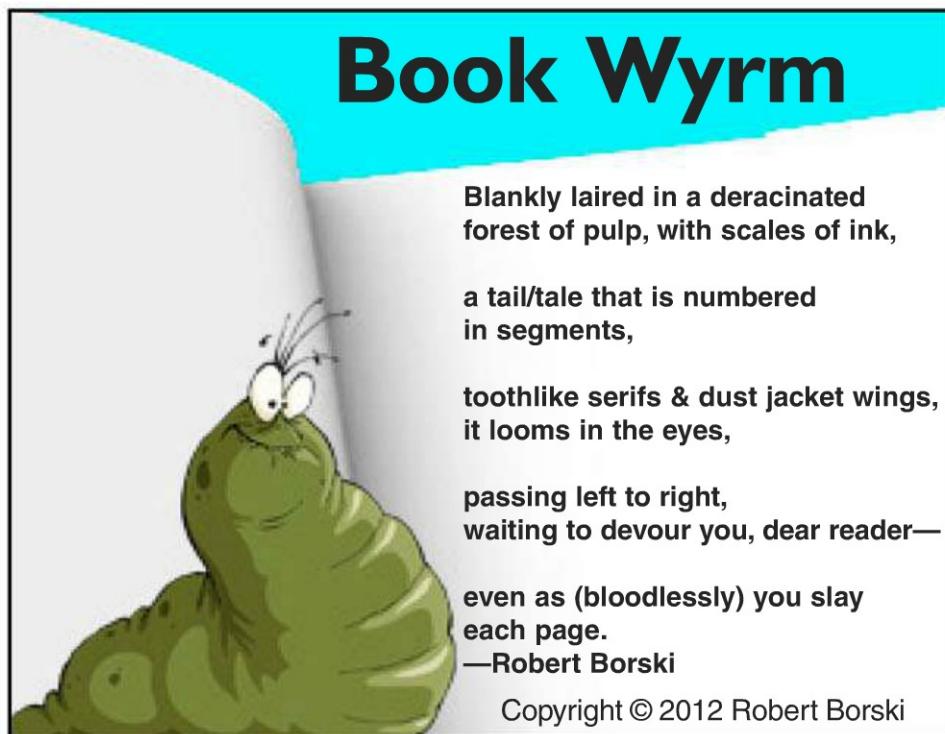
Meanwhile, the Halberstadt performance zooms merrily along, extending its reach farther into the future with every passing month. I'm sure Olaf Stapledon would have been fascinated by the vast scope of the concept.

How many organists it will use up as it proceeds no one can estimate; the organ itself, if properly maintained, should easily last it out. Those who are curious about this most enduring of all musical concerts can, with a little Googling, tune in on it on their computers. Various sites offer the opportunity to hear the current notes, and YouTube has a video of the pretty little organ, besides.

The next change of chord is due on July 5, 2012. I hope to be listening myself when it happens. And if I'm not able to be near my computer that day, there'll be another chance only fifteen months later, October 5, 2013. That's one of the many good things about this concert: there'll always be lots of time to catch at least some of it. ○

Copyright © 2012 Robert Silverberg

# Book Wyrm



# THE LAST JUDGMENT

James Patrick Kelly

**"The Last Judgment" first fell under the light of readers' eyes at the Rio Hondo Writers' Workshop in Taos, New Mexico, in June 2011. A few days later, some of the gender issues were presented and vigorously discussed in Professor Maura Kelly's "Gender and Sexualities" class at Portland State University. Jim is deeply indebted to all for their comments. This new novella about a future where aliens have removed all human males is set in the same universe as Jim's Nebula-Award-finalist "Men Are Trouble" (June 2004).**

## 1

I was pedaling toward lunch when my sidekick chirped. I pulled up and straddled the bike with one foot on the curb. There was no visual on the screen but some granny with a raspy voice announced that she was Maude Descano and needed to see me right away. I probably shouldn't have laughed. The only Maude Descano I'd ever heard of was so connected downtown that the City Mothers took turns mowing her lawn. I do my best for my clients but I'm a realist. Why would *the* Maude Descano be calling a private detective when she had Deputy Chief Little singing harmony for her? It was a question worth asking, so I did.

Whoever this granny was, she decided to get huffy. "I don't discuss my affairs over the phone," she said.

She would have to be a fossil if she remembered phones; their time was over before the devils disappeared all the men. "Fair enough," I said. "I'm just on my way to lunch, so maybe we can get together this afternoon. Say two o'clock? Where can we meet?"

"Make it now or don't bother, Ms. Hardaway. 122 Fairview."

My play then should have been to tell her to get cocked and cut the connection, except that Fairview ran through a neighborhood where even the sewers were lined with gold. Given her manners and that address, maybe she was *the* Maude Descano. If for no other reason than I might get to swipe an ashtray or spill something on her sofa, I decided not to bite back.

"Do you hear knocking on your front door?" I said. "That's me. Open up."

122 Fairview was the kind of Mock Tudor mansion that would have given Henry VIII nightmares. Its steep roof was covered in bright terra cotta and the walls were a hodgepodge of herringbone brickwork and stucco the color of smokers' teeth. Someone had painted the half timbers blue — probably a bot. I've never quite un-

derstood why bots love to paint things; they don't have the color sense that God gave to shrimp. The windows on the first floor had heavy iron casements and diamond-shaped leaded panes. Anyone looking out would see a world that was pinched and dark. An accurate view, but depressing as hell. If it were my place, I would've busted a chair through those windows to let in some light.

As I chained my bike to the wrought iron fence that surrounded the mansion and its vast lawn, a shadow blocked the sun. A flock of devils, a dozen, maybe twenty, headed downtown. We'd been seeing a lot of them lately. One of the local devils, Eller, had called a meeting to discuss something called the *Index of Human Dysfunction*. As if they would know; the devils *were* what was wrong with us. A cobblestone drive wandered toward the portico of the Descano place but was in no hurry to get there. Your average jane walking that drive would have plenty of time to think about the quality she was visiting, maybe get watery knees at the prospect of meeting so much money. I spent the time deciding what a flock of devils should be called. A damnation of devils? A pollution? Too bad crows already had locked up murder for their group identity. I passed beds of pastel impatiens and a boxwood hedge and then a stand of half a dozen peach trees, branches laden with ripe fruit that nobody seemed to want. There was already a scatter of drops in the grass, some rotting into gray-green fuzz. I stepped off the drive and smooshed one underfoot. It felt like the right thing to do.

A bot opened one of the grated doors. "Is this one making the acquaintance of Fay Hardaway?"

"Not if I can help it." I don't chitchat with strange bots. "I'm here for Maude Descano."

"Please enter and become comfortable." He stepped aside and I brushed by him.

The reception hall was opulent and knew it. The floors were polished green marble veined in white, the wainscoting looked to be mahogany and the central staircase was wide enough for a Fourth of July parade. On one wall hung a rose-colored tapestry of a unicorn eyeballing some medieval jane dressed in living room curtains. On the other was an enormous mirror in a gilt frame. Next to it was a mahogany gun cabinet with a glass display. That stopped me.

There had been a lot of gun play immediately after the men disappeared. Suicides, riots, robbery—the Crazy Time. The City Mothers had been melting them down into Peace Statues ever since; even the cops didn't carry. I'd seen guns in museums but didn't know much about them. Men's stuff, cocked. I counted three rifles—or maybe they were shotguns—and maybe half a dozen handguns hanging barrel down off brass mounts.

"Are these legal?"

"Collectors' items are permitted in the absence of bullets," said the bot to my back. "It is regrettable that Ms. Descano is making herself available to another person at present. She expresses the fullness of true apology and hopes you will take nutrition while you wait. Would that please Ms. Hardaway?"

"Oh, I get it." I put a snarl in my voice, although I knew it would bounce off the bot. "Her time is precious and mine is cheap."

"Your discontent is not unexpected. May this one add personal regret to that of Ms. Descano? You may wish to know that this one is her valet, called Kirby."

"Does valet outrank butler?"

"There are a diversity of duties that must be often completed."

I thought about leaving, but I'd come a long way. "You said something about lunch?"

The bot mentioned a handful of cold dishes: a carrot and orange mousse, ostrich liver pate, neartrout sushi rolls and curried asparagus soup. They all sounded better than the 29¢ combo meal I'd been planning to grab at McDonald's. "Or this one could drizzle hot salmon gel over a spinach salad," said the bot. "Perhaps a veal chop?"

“Can I eat off the good china?”  
“The Spode or the Wedgewood?”

2

The bot left me in the library. Maybe the size of it was intended to intimidate, although I doubted the granny had actually read many of the obsolete books. The room smelled of furniture polish and elderly carpet and paper going foxy at the edges. It was hard to see much in the gray light that squeezed through the two leaded windows, but busy shelves marched out of sight up the walls, accessed by four rolling ladders. The weight of all those dead ideas might have crushed someone who cared about the world before the devils, but that someone wasn’t me. There was one haven in the library from the collection; a walk-in fireplace that was practically a room in itself. It had dark wooden panels sculptured to look like bolts of cloth and benches at either end that faced each other. A dusty pile of birch logs perched on andirons in the firebox.

I sat on one of the benches and waited. The bot had called the walk-in fireplace an inglenook, and I rolled the word around in my mouth, getting the feel of it. I decided I liked it, not that I’d have much use for it. The baby’s bedroom in the apartment where Sharifa and I lived would have fit inside this particular inglenook.

The bot returned, wheeling a tray. On it was a bowl of fresh asparagus soup and a couple of sushi rolls. I made short work of them and sat back. I suppose I could have gotten up to inventory Descano’s taste in literature, but that was what I was expected to do. So I lit a cigarette instead, thinking maybe that would make the ashtray I wanted to steal magically appear. When it didn’t, I ashed onto the logs. Maude Descano came through the door just as I was flipping the cigarette butt into the fireplace.

She was a frail old bird, round in the body but with stork legs and a long and saggy neck. The skin of her face had turned the corner on pale and was headed for blue. The mouth and chin had sunk over the years away from the prominent nose and sharp brown eyes had retreated into mascara hollows. Her green kimono was decorated with golden phoenix birds, coils of purple cord, and bands of flowers. She closed the door and doddered toward the inglenook, maybe a step and a half ahead of the undertaker.

“Business not so good, missy?” Her voice was thin as lace. “I just have to call and you come running?”

I let that pass. The only sound in the room was the shuffling of her silk slippers.

“And then you let me keep you waiting,” she said at last. “Made it easy for me to put you in your place.”

“I’ll make a note of that.” I drew a checkmark in the air. “When this granny says hurry, come slow.” I laid my sidekick on the bench next to me but didn’t set it to record. “I came because I wanted to see the arrogant old bitch who they all talk about downtown. But they’ve overestimated you, Maude. Making me snap over here and then keeping me waiting was a weak move—a cliché. You can probably read about it in half the books you’ve got stacked in this funeral parlor. You can’t put me in any damn place, because I don’t give a shit about you. I ate soup and smoked a cigarette and now we’re talking. That’s what’s happened so far.”

“Attitude.” She settled on the bench opposite me.

“Yeah. A bit frayed at the cuffs, but it still fits.” I rested my hand on the sidekick. “I’m going to record now if we’re doing business. If not, thanks for lunch.”

“Cigarettes?” She nodded at me. “I’ll take one.”

I set the sidekick to record, crossed in front of the fireplace and shook a cigarette from the pack. “You know they sell these on every street corner.”

“Kirby doesn’t let me smoke.”

I lit it for her. “You let your bots tell you what to do?”

"Doctors tell me what to do." She inhaled and held it in. Her eyes got distant for a moment. "Kirby knows who's in charge." She sighed and smoke curled from her nostrils. "You're killing yourself with these things, missy."

"A lot of people kill themselves—it's the national pastime, or haven't you heard? I'm just on the installment plan." I dropped the pack in her lap. "Keep it." I settled back onto my bench.

She smoked. I watched her.

"Know anything about art?" she said finally.

"Not much. We were studying it in the fifth grade when my school got burned down."

She blew smoke at me. "Bad luck to have to grow up back then." She leaned over and ground the cigarette butt against the hearth. "Were you born before or after?"

"After."

She scuffed a sandal against the floor. "So all you've ever known is craziness."

"Craziness?" Grannies do love their cock nostalgia; it makes my skin crawl. "I've heard that men were pretty much unhinged, Maude. Rape. War. Genocide."

"There was that." She made a dismissive gesture. "And they liked to be on top, not that they were any good at it. But we had two hundred thousand years to get used to living with men. Hard to get used to being by ourselves overnight. Or in four decades."

I hadn't biked across town for a history lesson. Especially a chapter that the devils had written. I hated the devils. "So what about art?"

"Heard of a painter named Hieronymus Bosch?"

"Sounds like a virus." I glanced down at my sidekick, which had already completed the search. The screen showed a sketch of an old man in a floppy hat. His skin as wrinkled as bark. "That really his name?"

She shook her head. "Jheronimus or maybe Jeroen. Brits mangled it into Hieronymus, which we're stuck with. Last name was van Aken but he signed his paintings Bosch after his hometown, 's-Hertogenbosch. That's in Holland. He was born around 1450, died in 1518. Painted on wood, lots of his best work is lost. Only twenty-seven undisputed paintings and nine drawings."

"So he's rare. And valuable?"

"Priceless."

That was one word I had never believed in. Everything has a price; the trick is getting to the negotiation. "And he painted what?"

"Some saints. Sinners mostly. He was religious, saw damnation all around him. Demons and monsters and hellfire. They called him 'the maker of devils.'"

I crunched that for a moment. Some people claimed that our devils—the aliens who disappeared the men—must have scouted earth before. They said that all those images of biblical devils were based on historical encounters with our all-too-real aliens. Maybe Bosch had just been painting what he'd seen. "Sounds like a man for our times. So what about him?"

"My late husband . . ."

"Wait." I said. "You were married? Just how old are you, Maude?"

"Married and had a daughter the old-fashioned way." She gave me a silent laugh that showed me more than I wanted to see of her gums. "The old sperm and egg trick. What, does that shock you, missy?"

I grimaced. "Better you than me."

"My husband's name was Nicky." Maude Descano licked her lips. "He liked to think of himself as an art collector. Whenever he came into money, he'd head off to one of those flossy auction houses like Sotheby's or Christie's to buy himself a present. A Diego Rivera and a Bakota helmet mask and then a Richard Lethem. Some minor

Dalis. Roman coins. Three Ansel Adams prints of Yosemite. He bought that Ryder over there, except it turned out to be a forgery." She pointed at a tiny painting that was all dark smudges. "Just five months before Nicky had the heart attack, he found a Bosch. It had been hacked off a lost painting on wood called *The Last Judgment*. Provenance is a little cloudy. Maybe it only came from Bosch's workshop. But Nicky liked to tell people it was the real deal." She paused. "It's been stolen."

3

"Last time I saw it was Tuesday." She heaved herself off the bench. Her slippers whispered across the library floor. She flicked a light switch and an overhead spot lit an empty expanse of wall between bookshelves. "Noticed this yesterday."

I came up behind her. Two pan head screws stuck out from the wallboard about fifteen centimeters apart; a thread of dust dangled from one of them.

"What kind of security do you have here?"

"Just Kirby."

I snorted. We lean too much on the damn bots; sometimes I think this is their world now and we're just renting. "Doesn't pay to cut corners, Maude." Brown paint on the wall had faded; there was a dark coffee-colored shadow, maybe thirty centimeters by twenty, where the little painting had been. "It must have been hanging a long time."

"Fifty-some years."

I pointed at the bronze bracket the size of a cash card on the floor. "That fell off of what?"

"The Bosch was attached to the wall with Ryman hangers screwed into the frame. It's called a keeper. Hides the hangers and the screws and secures the mount."

"I'm guessing there would have been two of them? Where's the other?"

"You're the detective."

I let that pass. "Could be fingerprints on it."

"Sure." She was frowning. "But who cares? I know who stole it."

"Then call the cops," I said. "You bought them, might as well pull them out of the drawer."

"If it comes to that, I just might."

She was pissing me off with her games. I waited for her to go on but she gave me nothing. Maybe she was waiting for me to play twenty questions with her. Maybe she thought it would make her look smart.

"Excuse me, Maude," I said, "but now that the mystery is solved, is there anything else I can do for you? Mow the laundry? Wash the lawn? Otherwise I should be going."

"Don't be ridiculous." She sniffed. "As I said, I had a daughter. Her name was Renata. She died two years ago." Her face was stone. "Killed herself, if you must know. Like you said, the national pastime."

I didn't say I was sorry; I don't think she would have heard me.

"Her daughter's name is Anne. She'll have the Bosch, or she'll know where it is."

"Your granddaughter stole it? You know this how?"

"She was here Tuesday, the last time I saw the painting. She said she needed money. When I wouldn't give it to her, she got angry, called me names and stormed out."

"What did she want the money for?"

"She wouldn't say, but I think she wanted to use it to run away from me." The granny tugged at the belt of her kimono. "Which is why I didn't give it to her. She's a troubled girl, very much like her mother."

"How much was she asking for?"

"Six thousand dollars."

I could tell she wanted me to think about that, so I did. I considered what six large could buy. A house with a lawn. A college education. Or a dozen PIs like me. "Has she asked for money before?"

"Often."

"Have you given it to her?"

"Sometimes, but never more than a couple of hundred."

I pulled my sidekick out and took pictures of the library and the space where the painting had hung. I blew a quickseal onto the bracket and put it in my pocket. I examined the library door. It was paneled and heavy, made of a dark wood, mahogany by the look of it. The brass doorknob had a double cylinder key lock; you needed the key not only to get in but also to get out. If it had been locked, getting into the library would have been a problem for anyone but a pro. Somehow I didn't think Maude's granddaughter was in the business.

"I'll need a pix of the painting."

"See Kirby."

"And what does your bot have to say about all of this?"

"Nothing. He reports no knowledge of what happened here."

"Not much in the way of security, is he?" I pulled a book off the shelf at random. "Say, is there anything else here worth stealing?" It was *The Great Gatsby*, bound in leather. "I might take a crack at you myself, Maude. Seems like easy enough work." I opened it to the title page. Copyright 2011—before the devils. "So she lets herself into your house and this room. She pries a painting on a chunk of wood from the wall, knocks some of the hardware off, and skips out again without either you or the bot hearing a damn thing?" Saying it out loud didn't improve her story much. "Do you know how much you're going to have to pay me to believe that?"

"Two hundred now." She pointed a finger at me. "And another two when you bring it to me." Her arm shook. "I want that Bosch, missy."

It was triple my usual fee for what would be a straightforward extraction, if the case were as simple as she said. But it wasn't, and we both knew it. That was why the pay was so good.

"Why?"

"Why?" She looked puzzled, as if I'd asked her to explain air. "What kind of question is that? Because it's mine."

"You like it? Your favorite thing in this antique store?"

She sniffed. "Not particularly." She watched me judge her, but my good opinion wasn't part of our deal. "There's a principle involved here. A principle of ownership."

"So when I get it for you, what happens to the granddaughter?" I blew the dust off *The Great Gatsby* and gave it to her. "You throw her to the law?"

"Absolutely not. Anne is all the family I have." She looked weary, as if she were feeling not only the weight of the book but of her enormous library, as if she were trying to bear up under the burden of the entire mansion and all the money that had built it. "If you bring that painting back, it was never stolen."

"I don't know, Maude. I've never had much luck changing the past."

She smiled at me, her teeth long and yellow and fierce against her thin gums. "You'd be surprised at how easy it can be."

#### 4

I grilled the bot, but he was no help. "This one is regrettably uninformed in that matter." I didn't believe him, but I couldn't see an easy way to knock him off his story. When I discovered whatever it was that Descano was keeping from me, I would shake him until his sensors rattled.

Why don't I trust bots? Because the devils made them. The grannies were crazy with

grief and rage for years after the disappearance. Everything stopped. Lots of it burned. I grew up in that world of pain; I watched girls starve, their moms kill themselves. But giving us bots did not make up for what the devils took away. Still doesn't. Sure, bots keep the lights on, crops growing, and shelves stocked. They bury us when we die. There wouldn't be any damn economy without them, even though we're doing more for ourselves every day. But the devils never gave us the owner's manual for their bots. Supposedly they can't lie, but the truths they tell are often impossible to decipher. The bots bow and scrape but everyone knows they have their own agenda.

Which is doing the devils' work. I hate the devils.

The bot shot me a pix of the Bosch and a vid of Anne Descano. She'd been living with Maude up until a few months ago. He had a list of recent addresses for her but couldn't say whether it was complete. Apparently she was skipping, so there was no guarantee she'd be at any of them. He gave me a call for her too, Anne@Idlewood.03284, but said it always went to her message and that she never called back. So the fluff was playing hard to find. I suppose if I had to perch on the family tree next to Maude Descano, I would too. I didn't thank the bot and I didn't say goodbye; he was blathering something about his truest hopes for timely success when I closed the door behind me.

I paused on the portico to check my sidekick and saw that Maude had already transferred the two hundred dollar retainer. That would make Sharifa happy. I'd been working a lot lately, but mostly for small beer and peanuts. If I could clear this case without having to ransack every skiphouse in the city, I could afford to take some time off. Maybe bring the family down to Williamshead or Salt Bay.

I opened the vid and got my first look at Anne Descano. She wasn't a fluff at all but a tommy with a brown crewcut and big shoulders and an extra helping of muscle. She was wearing a Will Ill T-shirt, baggy pants and black tanker boots. Either she was binding the hell out of her breasts or had had the double mastectomy. The vid showed her at a picnic that appeared to be in the backyard of the Descano mansion; she was throwing a football to some other tommy while a group of bored janes and grannies watched from a picnic table.

As I biked back to my office, I thought about how I was going to take the painting away from her if she decided not to play nice. I've gone up against some rough company, but this tommy looked like she could snap me in two and pick her teeth with the short end. So best be careful, Fay. And smart. It wasn't a bad plan, except that if I really were interested in being careful and smart, I would have taken up accounting.

I locked the bike to a rack in front of 35 Market Street and climbed the three stories to Hardaway Investigative Services. I share the third floor with Crazy Martha, who is smarter than me and more careful. She *is* an accountant. My office is just two dull rooms, done in Early Yard Sale style. I'd decorated it so I would have an incentive to spend as little time there as possible. I opened the sidekick, created a new folder on the desktop and shot everything I had on the case into it. I poured myself a drink from the office bottle and made some voice notes about my meeting with Maude Descano.

I thought mapping Anne's skiphouses might be a good place to start. Maybe I could tease out some kind of pattern. But I couldn't. She had skipped to eleven different addresses around the city that the bot had known about, and there had no doubt been more. Some she lived at for a day or two, others for weeks. She had crashed in all kinds of unowned buildings in all kinds of neighborhoods: ranches and bungalows, Spanish and craftsman style houses, two apartments and even Unit 32 of the Holiday Inn on Great Randolph Street. The only good news was that she had come back to several of them, which meant that if only I could be in eleven places at once, I might have a chance of catching up with her before Christmas.

I ran the vid again, and then, since I had to get Aissa in half an hour, I played a hunch. I tried the call that the bot had given me. As predicted, I got Anne's message. She had one of those rumbling, hormone-soaked voices that live in the basement next to the furnace. "Hi, this is Andy. I'm here but I'm avoiding someone I don't like. Leave me a message and if I don't call back, it's you."

So Anne was an Andy now. It seemed we had attitude in common.

"Andy," I said, "this is Fay@Market.03284. You don't know me, but I saw you throwing a football around the other day and I was wondering if you'd be interested in trying out for a flag football team, the Bad Grills? We play in the West Side League. It's not a big commitment, two evening practices a week and a game every other Sunday during the season. Think about it, okay? We could use a stud like you. That's Fay@Market.03284. Thanks."

It was a weak move, but it was the only one I had handy. Maude's bot was claiming that AndyAnne didn't pay attention to her messages. Maybe, but it cost money to keep a call live, and the one thing I knew for sure was that Andy Descano was looking for money. Could be that it was just Maude and her bot who were getting the freeze. And if Andy checked, she would find that the Bad Grills *were* in West Side. Sharifa had been their number three receiver and number one defensive back before she'd had Aissa; we still went to Bad Grill games once in a while.

Then I put the case to bed for the night. Sharifa and I were working moms and it was my turn to pick up the kid at daycare.

Aissa was almost two years old and I was still trying on motherhood to see if it fit. Sharifa was her birth mother. Me, I had gotten scrubbed the first and only time I'd been seeded. Sharifa had wanted us to have my baby; the abortion nearly busted us up. But the thing was, I couldn't see then how I could be a PI and a parent at the same time. And the idea that the aliens who had done for all the men were planting an embryo in me without my asking . . . well, it filled me with stony rage. No kid needs a mom that angry. When Sharifa got seeded with Aissa, though, things were different. I was different. Maybe I'm a better person now. Or not as good a detective.

I locked my bike onto the rail of our front porch and trotted the three blocks to our local Precious Life Center. The bots had retrofitted several storefronts into a single space with big display windows so that passers-by could peer in and be reassured that womankind still had a future. No expense had been spared; the city always approved the budget of the Department of Youth Protection and Development.

PLCs used to make me itch. They didn't exist when I was born, three years after the disappearance. When I was a kid, life was not particularly precious. When the devils first made contact, the population of the world was 7.3 billion. On the next Tuesday, it was 3.7. The grannies claimed that the men popped like soap bubbles—no muss, no fuss, no dust to dust. Estimates are that almost a billion women killed themselves or died in accidents or riots or of starvation in the Crazy Years immediately after the disappearance. Decades later, we are still killing ourselves. Too many of my cases are about women who have decided to check out of this cocked world—often with no warning signs. Whenever I saw a mother and a daughter together in a Precious Life Center, I couldn't help but worry that the mom was about to fold and maybe take the kid with her.

Even though the staff kept it spotless, our PLC always smelled of curdling milk and baby oil. Peg Skovlar saw me come in and held a finger to her lips. I slipped off my joggers and padded across the toddler room. She pointed at Aissa, who was sitting in a nest of floor pillows with a board book about baby animals on her lap and a stack of others beside her.

"Ducky do *quack-ack-ack*," she said and turned the page. "Mee-yow, kitty." Another page. "Doggie. Doggie do it." Another. "Monkey. Hoo-hoo-hoo."

"They don't usually read to themselves at this age," Peg whispered. "You've got a smart girl there, Fay."

"Takes after her mother." I knew what Peg wanted me to feel, but I wasn't ever going to be that kind of parent. Yes, I would always be there to pick up my little mop-headed miracle whenever she fell, point her in the right direction and teach her everything I knew about the road we were on. But love her? No. When you love someone, you must give them a bit of your truest self, and I had nothing but damage to offer this beautiful little creature. Sharifa could love her. I would protect her.

Although she was only halfway through the book, Aissa shut it abruptly and pushed it impatiently off her lap. "Maybe more book?" she said to herself.

"No more books, Aissa," I said, "Time to go home."

"Mommy Fay!" The way her face lit up melted my bones. I dropped to my knees to hug her. "Mommy Fay comes." She launched herself at me, scattering the books in every direction and I stooped to catch her embrace. "Maybe bye-bye?" Everything was "maybe" with her these days.

"Soon," I said. "But first we have to pick up the books for Peg. You don't want to leave a mess."

"No mess, okay." She bounced against my hip.

## 5

"Agin eggy." Aissa waved her spoon in command.

Most of her supper was on the floor around her high chair. "More egg please," I said. "Can you say egg?"

"Peas." She grinned and offered me the spoon. "Maybe eggy agin peas?"

Sharifa said eggy all the time, but if my cop pals ever heard me saying *eggy*, I'd have to move to Saskatchewan.

Aissa shrieked in delight when Sharifa came home and, as usual, the two of them flew into a hug. I watched from the kitchen pass-through, feeling the distance between me and them stretch. Aissa wriggled as her mother planted kisses on her forehead.

I was damn sure that no one had ever been that glad to see me. It wasn't that I had a problem with the bond that my wife and our kid shared. I just had to get used to the idea that I had been pushed back to second in line with my lover.

Supper was the *arroz con pollo* casserole that Sharifa had made on her last day off. She did the cooking because I never really learned. I was mostly schooled on the street and home ec was not part of the curriculum. Sharifa told me about her patients at the ICU. Head trauma, heart attack, kidney failure. The Williams granny came off the ventilator and was moved to the second floor. I described my chat with Maude Descano. Sharifa was more interested in Descano's house than the new case. She actually moaned when I told her about the asparagus soup. Sharifa loves asparagus, but they're hideously expensive out of season. I promised I'd buy her a bunch with some of the two hundred dollars I'd got as a retainer. Meanwhile Aissa whirled around the apartment, climbed onto our laps, crawled under the table, ate two bites of *chicky*, clattered saucepan covers out of the kitchen drawer, drank from her sippy cup, and chattered non-stop in no particular language at all.

My sidekick chirped while Sharifa was giving Aissa her bath. The screen was blank but a Jane with a squeaky voice said, "Is this Fay@Market.03284?"

"Speaking."

"You're looking for Andy Descano?"

"Sure."

There was a moment of silence, as if the caller were waiting for me to make the next move. I let her wait. It was her call.

"How did you get this number?" she said.

"Put Andy on."

"He doesn't want to play for your football team."

*He?* I liked that. "Why not? The uniforms are really cute."

She sniffed. "Is this about the old lady?"

"Look, Jane, I need to talk to Andy." My sidekick displayed the list of skiphouses the bot had given me for Anne-now-Andy Descano. "Are you still at the place on Chestnut?" It was the one she-now-he had crashed at the most often. "I can be there in half an hour."

"He's not here."

"What if we wait there together until he comes back? Who is this again?"

"Nobody." She broke the connection.

I stared at my sidekick for a moment, hoping it would offer me a clue as to what I ought to do. If I went to the skip on Chestnut, there was no guarantee that anyone would be there when I arrived. But it was my first real lead.

The door to the bathroom was ajar and I peeked around it. Sharifa knelt beside the tub where Aissa ruled as queen of the bubble bath. Her subjects—dolphin, duck, whale, starfish, crab, shark, and seahorse—bobbed around her; a crown of suds dribbled down mats of her dark hair. "Mommy Fay, watch!" She scooped a plastic cup into the water then dumped it over her head, sputtering and laughing hysterically. "Rinseys!" She wiped suds from her eyes. "Aissa do rinseys."

"You're the brave one, Aissa," I lifted my voice a half octave so she'd know how pleased I was. "Rinseys all by yourself. Such a big girl."

While she preened, I caught Sharifa's attention and twirled my index finger.

"Where?" she said.

"Out. Just got a call."

"The Descano girl?"

I nodded. "Apparently she's a he."

"Do you have to?" She cocked her head to one side and let a smile steal across her face. "I was thinking of putting her to bed soon."

I knew that smile; it used to keep me up nights.

Aissa was splashing in annoyance. "Maybe not bed! Not soon!"

"We like the water in the tub, Aissa." I knew who was going to win this one, so I stooped to give Sharifa a kiss goodbye.

Her face was tight with disappointment. "I've got a twelve hour shift tomorrow," she said. "Can't wait up."

"Sorry." I brushed her cheek with my forefinger. "Married to our jobs. Bye, Aissa." I blew her a kiss.

"Not bed." Aissa was still negotiating. I left them to it. Sharifa was a doctor, I told myself, and a mommy. I was a PI. Missing each other was part of our deal.

## 6

Chestnut Avenue ran past Old Courthouse Square, which was busy on a warm July night. The City Mothers were sponsoring a concert: a bunch of grannies bleating oldies from before the disappearance. Music had skipped my generation; we'd been too busy trying to survive to learn the cello. But the sooner we kissed all that cock nostalgia goodbye and started writing tunes of our own, the saner I'd be. The crowd backed all the way to the Peace Statues of Rosalind Franklin and Daniel Ellsberg. I had to walk my bike past the lemonade stand and the carts with ice cream and sushi and hot dogs; the tommies and janes seemed more interested in the free food than the singing. We all looked up when the devil flapped over, streaking toward bot town. I lit a cigarette—Sharifa doesn't let me smoke at home—and watched for Andy Descano as I passed through the crowd.

Beyond the square, Chestnut climbed into Foy's Gardens. In the Crazy Time a series of fires had burned through its row houses and modest storefronts; there had been nobody to put them out. After came scavengers, who gnawed the charred bones of the neighborhood and scared off most of those still living there. For a while the only inhabitants were the few crazies who didn't understand how everything had changed, but in the last few years it had become part of bot town.

Although depression and suicide continued to squeeze our shattered world, the population had stabilized at just over a billion, even as the number of bots continued to grow. Supposedly there was now one bot for every five women on earth. Most of them propped up our pretend economy, doing jobs we didn't want to do. Recently they'd swarmed the parts of the city we had abandoned, rehabbing and rebuilding. Never mind that nobody wanted to live in bot town, in part because they'd always had some cocked ideas about architecture. Left to their own, they built nightmares: windows became mirrors, stairs climbed to dead ends. A favorite trick was to divide big spaces into a beehive of narrow closets. Then there were the rooms with stalactite ceilings or delicate glass floors. These had no doors, only portholes through which they could be admired. Bots loved sirens and wainscoting and open plumbing. Above all, they lived to paint: walls, floors, ceilings, doors, concrete, metal, wood, plastic, even trees and rocks. Chestnut Avenue sported zebra stripes in the 1200 block.

Sure, a bot would straighten what was crooked if you asked, but the next bot to come along would fold your floor plans into origami and then get busy. I could see that some human must have taken charge of 1217 Chestnut, which was sandwiched between a burnt out foundation and a rubble strewn lot. The skiphouse was a tasteful brown Victorian with a slate roof and a bay window the size of a buffalo. I could imagine living there with Sharifa and Aissa if it hadn't been on the wrong side of nowhere with no shopping, no schools and no neighbors but bots and empty lots.

As I climbed the front steps, I could see the door was ajar. There was a newish sneaker in front of it with a dark spatter across white laces.

"Knock, knock," I called. I slid into the hall, fists curled to stop the tingle in my fingertipps. Even a detective who said *eggy* could smell trouble with this setup. "Who's there?" I muttered to no one in particular. Rooms to either side were filled with dusk and not much else. To the right, a parlor and a couple of folding chairs aimed at a wall screen. To the left, a table made of a sheet of plywood and two sawhorses. There was a pizza box on it, some dirty paper plates. "Andy Descano?" Ahead, a hallway washed in shadow and a smudge of stairs. And bigger spatters. I was wishing I'd brought the air taser, wishing I'd stayed home with Sharifa, when I heard a door bang at the back of the house. Then I was running. It was dark and then dim as I burst into the kitchen. Something jerked on the other side of the screen door and fell *up* off the back steps. I tore the door open. The sleek torpedo of a body shot into the air, wings scooping air with a twenty foot span. I know what I saw and I know what I heard. An angry devil makes a sharp grating crow, like gears stripping. I watched the thing wheel overhead and flail for downtown. But I was pretty sure that nobody was going to believe me. We see devils all the time but they don't come out to play with us very often. It's about the only thing about them I'm grateful for.

I went back inside and snapped on the light. The kitchen had been just a blur as I raced though, but now I could see that whoever had been staying at the skiphouse had no talent for housekeeping. The sink was filled with mismatched pots, the windows were murky and the counters needed wiping down. The utensil drawer hung open. There were boxes of Cheerios, Ginger Nips, and Fruit Loops on top of the refrigerator. The body was slumped in front of it, head down, knees tucked under the torso, as if she were praying to breakfast. Her feet stuck out; one was bare. I rolled her over to see if she was alive. To see if she was Andy Descano.

She wasn't.

No corpse is pretty, but this one was particularly hard on the eyes. The kid was slim, twenty-something, dressed like a tommy in camo pants, a chain link belt and a Yankettes T-shirt. There was some bruising on the right arm but it was the head that had gotten most of the killer's attention. Blood was coming out of one ear; two ribbons of it trickled into the open mouth. The mouth was missing a couple of teeth and one eye had been punched shut. The other had rolled up in its socket, as if the poor girl had been looking to heaven for rescue—or at least relief. Apparently God didn't deliver in this part of town.

She appeared to have been transitioning into a *he*. He'd had chest reconstruction; I didn't check for bottom surgery. From the dark spidery mustache and sideburns, I guessed he was well into the hormone replacement. I didn't know where to put this information quite yet. On the shelf next to the Descano kid, at least.

I would have to call the cops eventually, but since the dead tommy didn't seem to be in any hurry, I went through the place turning on lights. The bathroom at the top of the stairs had a shower with no door. The toilet was dry because the supply pipe was just a stub, but there was a plastic bucket filled with water beside it. Both bedrooms upstairs had mattresses on the floor. The first was empty. The one he'd been using had a sleeping bag decorated with rocket ships on it and a backpack beside it. I pulled on gloves and unpacked T-shirts, jeans, silky boxers, and white socks. At the bottom was a pair of lace-up military boots, size 7 1/2, same as the lonely sneaker. Shampoo, toothbrush but no toothpaste, and one bent tampon in a side pocket; in the storm flap, a cheap multitool, a flashlight, and a dead sidekick with a cracked bezel. It wasn't much to leave behind, not that a tommy in a skiphouse would be drawing up a will.

I was repacking the sorry lot of it when I heard a sidekick chirp. It wasn't mine.

## 7

I made myself lighter than air as I floated downstairs, listening for a second chirp. *There*: a little muffled at the front of the house. I found it under the pizza box on the makeshift table, hit answer and said nothing. I was due for a miracle.

"We're in." It sounded like the Descano kid. "He'll do the operation."

I held the sidekick at arm's length and dredged up an anonymous grunt to encourage him. "Hm?"

"Day after tomorrow."

I tried another grunt. No miracle.

"Beetle?"

I let the silence stretch until it broke.

"Who is this?" he said.

"My name is Fay Hardaway, Andy."

He thought that over. "Put Beetle on."

"He can't come to the phone," I said. "He said I should pick up and take the message if Andy called. So, the operation is on Thursday?"

"What are you doing with my sidekick?"

"It was just where you left it." I tried to sound amused, as in *we do such silly things sometimes, don't we?* "Under the pizza box."

"Put Beetle on."

"Can't. He . . . uh . . . we had a devil here, Andy. Things got kind of cocked."

"A devil? Did it get the Bosch?"

"How should I know?" *Game over*. I might have laughed if there hadn't been a dead tommy down the hall. "Beetle didn't tell me where it was."

Andy's shout made the sidekick quack like one of Aissa's ducks. "Who the hell are you?"

"Take it easy, Andy." I said. "I'm a friend."  
"The hell you are." He broke the connection.

"Be that way then," I said to the silence. I wanted to feel good. All the stoplights had turned green on Hardaway Street and I was coasting downhill toward an easy two hundred bucks. Time to clear space for me in the Gumshoe Hall of Fame; I'd cracked the case in less than a day. The only problem was that it was covered in blood. That didn't use to bother me so much. I wondered what being a mommy had cost me.

The hard part wasn't finding the missing painting, now that I had a pretty good idea that it was on the premises. There aren't many places to hide something in a skiphouse. It took me all of ten minutes before I found it tucked into a ziplock bag and buried in the box of Fruit Loops. How had the devil missed it? The clue was in a yellow starburst right on the front of the box. *Free Prize Inside.*

I contemplated the hard part as I worked the painted rectangle of wood out of the bag. I knew Maude Descano would expect me to rewrite recent history so that the cops didn't jam me or drop this killing on her golden doorstep. The Bosch was just a bit bigger than one of Maude's books. I glanced at the image to make sure I had what Maude wanted. I was no art historian, but it seemed to me that old Jerome had been playing a joke on his patrons. The paint was brighter than in the pix Kirby had sent me, but it still had all the charm of a stain. The devil looked nothing like ours. It was naked and bent way over so that it grinned back at the viewer through its spread legs. Mooning us—no question about it. There was an arrow or something sticking out of its ass. Stupid cock tricks. The wings were outstretched, but they looked more like they belonged on a butterfly than a mass-murdering alien. As I slipped the thing back into the bag, I noticed it wasn't in very good shape. A few flakes of tea-colored paint had lifted, but were not yet loose. I couldn't see how this thing was worth getting dead over. Or why a devil might kill for it, if that was what had just happened.

I raced upstairs and finished repacking Beetle's stuff. Then back to Andy's sidekick in the pizza room. I brought the record of the last call up and then bumped our sidekicks, using my scrub app to make it go away. Sure any record could be retrieved, but the cops would need some serious data forensics to discover that there was anything missing in the first place. Then I searched Andy's contact list for doctors. I found three and copied them but I was running out of time. The cops would wonder why I had taken so long to call this murder in. I ran to my bike and pumped like my hair was on fire. One block, two. I remembered a wall in front of the vacant library because some bot had painted the stones tomato red. I muscled a capstone aside, settled the block of wood into the space between it and the next course and pushed the cap back into place.

On the way back, I called Sharifa and tried to tell her as little as I could. Being out of breath helped. I said that I had the Bosch and that we were definitely taking a vacation as soon as she could get off work. I told her that I had found a dead tommy, that I didn't know who he was and that the cops would be coming any minute. I told her I'd probably spend the night downtown telling my story twenty-seven times to stony faces. I asked if she could get Aissa to daycare. I told her I loved her. I left out the devil and the blood, but that was all right. Leaving stuff out was another part of our deal.

It was forty, maybe forty-five minutes since I had spotted the devil. I looked around the kitchen one last time, but really, what did I have to worry about? Sure I'd moved the body, tampered with evidence and lifted a clue that provided a motive for murder. But I got along with cops. Cops were some of my best friends. Why I was practically a cop myself, except for the badge, the paycheck and the selfless desire to serve and protect.

"I think," I said to Beetle, "it's time we had some law."  
He didn't object. I lit a cigarette and stepped outside to wait.

## 8

For the next five hours I got passed up the chain of command as the bearer of bad news that nobody wanted to hear. A Detective Timms, whom I'd never met, took my statement at the crime scene then asked her partner, Lisa Agar, who used to walk a beat near my office, to escort me downtown. There I ran into Lieutenant Stevie Smick. She invited me to a tête-à-tête in a cozy windowless, concrete-block room, furnished with a table trimmed with gouges—or maybe teeth marks—three mismatched chairs and a coffee shelf with a half full pot and three mugs stolen from Goodfillers. There was no ashtray, so I dropped the dead butts on the floor. We chatted for a couple of hours. Stevie still blamed me for that riot at the Tin Shark, so we had a lot to catch up on. Later, Deputy Chief C. G. Little joined us, despite the inconvenient hour. She was a bulky woman, subtle as a hammer. Rumpled and up past her bedtime, she reminded me of what would happen to me if my story didn't hold up.

I knew why I was barbequed and it wasn't because of the murder of one Behita Berry, sometimes known as Beetle. It was because of the devil.

"Let's go over this again," said Stevie Smick. "I checked the weather. Sunset was 8:34. Your call came at 9:21. A lot of unexplained time, Hardaway."

"Which I already explained. I was hired to find Anne Descano. I was told that she was staying in skiphouses, probably including this one. I decided to check it. I got there after sunset. When I found the body, I thought Descano might be connected, so I searched the house."

"And went through the dead girl's things."

"And went through the dead girl's things." I turned both hands palm up on the battered table. "Which I told you. And you didn't even have to ask."

"And what about the sidekick?"

"It was dead. I didn't have time to charge it."

"Which one?"

"I only found one. I think we've rehearsed this part, Lieutenant. Five, no, six times now. My next line is *Was there another?*"

"You searched the house." She sneered. "You should know."

I tilted toward C. G., looking for sympathy. She gave me ice cold nothing. "How long had the girl been dead?" Stevie said.

"Like I said, I'm no coroner. You want me to guess? Ten, maybe twenty minutes. How about half an hour?"

"And you arrived when?"

"Again, I wasn't paying attention exactly. After sunset. Maybe eight forty-five. Eight-fifty."

"Bullshit."

C. G. Little stirred. She wasn't playing good or bad cop, just bleak cop. "You just heard her tell you that sunset was 8:34," she said. "You say you ID a devil at 8:50. Why don't we believe you? It would have been dark by then."

"It's July 12th, or was when you brought me in, Chief." I wanted her in the conversation. "Night takes its time in the summer. There was plenty of light."

"Maybe it was a crow," said Stevie.

"Yeah and maybe it was Mary Poppins." I lit a cigarette and realized that I was down to two. I needed to start conserving; Stevie wasn't about to let me step out to buy another pack. "Look, if I had left the devil out of this, then we'd all be snug in bed by now. Why would I want to spend half the night with you two?"

"What's your devil's motive for murder?" C. G. said. "This Behita Berry is nobody."

I grinned at her. "Don't know." It was the first time that either of them had acknowledged that there might have been a devil.

"And why leave the body?" said Stevie. "It could just have disappeared her."

The thought had occurred to me too. But devils did away with the men forty-some years ago. They don't flap around disappearing people these days; the bots say it violates their code of wisdom. Apparently it's okay to disappear a couple of billion men, but not a single inconvenient woman. I did witness a devil disappear someone once, but it was to prevent a murder. My murder, as a matter of fact. "I don't say the devil killed her," I said. "For all I know, it just stumbled into this mess. Same way I did."

"But it ran. At least that's your story."

"Maybe it thought I was the killer, coming back."

"Why?" said Stevie. "It could have just disappeared you if it got worried. Nobody would've known. Or cared."

I'd been able to keep the anger in my pocket until then, but now it swelled up and started ripping seams. "I've got a wife and a kid," I said. "And I've got friends. Some of them are even cops. Cops who don't squeal when a devil pinches them."

Stevie gave me a lizard look.

"That's enough, Hardaway," said C.G.

"No it isn't, Chief. Maybe Lieutenant Smick slept through the part where the devils wiped three and a half billion people off the planet. And maybe she thinks it's cute that there's nothing we can do about that. But real cops don't roll over for mass murderers."

"You wouldn't know a real cop if she sat on your face."

"Smick, enough," said C.G. wearily. "What's next, hair pulling? Swiping her lunch money?"

Stevie squirmed on her chair. I gave the Chief a laugh to show her I was paying attention.

"I hate the devils," said C.G., "and so does Lieutenant Smick. But that doesn't make a saint out of you, Hardaway."

Someone cracked the door open and murmured "Chief?"

"I'll be right there." C.G. glared at us. "You two kiss and make up while I'm gone." She shut the door behind her.

"You got hot there, shamus," said Stevie. "That's not like you."

"You play too rough, girl scout."

She got up, and poured me a cup of coffee I didn't want. "What do you expect?" She set it in front of me.

"I expect someone to believe me."

She laughed. "What, the gag about not finding Descano's sidekick? Pretty thin, Hardaway. You're better than that. Come on, when did you get to the scene? Really?"

I dipped my finger into the coffee and licked it. "How do you drink this sludge?"

"We don't." She grinned. "We inflict it on the perps." Then she lowered her voice and changed into the good cop. "Bot town has gone quiet on this one. At least, the Chestnut neighborhood has."

"They didn't see the devil?"

"Not only that, but they never saw Berry, Descano, or you. Usually bots come forward on these things, but I get the feeling that the circus could've paraded up Chestnut shooting skyrocketts and they wouldn't have noticed."

"The bots are covering up? Why?"

"Maybe to protect your devil." She knocked twice on the tabletop. "That's about the only part of your story we believe. So why don't you help me out now and tell me the rest?"

C.G. Little opened the door to the interrogation room. "Let's go, Hardaway. You have visitors."

I could tell Stevie didn't like that. Who had the clout to interrupt a police interrogation?

## 9

Grete Sams was a large, round woman who had always had trouble buying clothes. She kept trying for swank when she was built for comfort. Her breasts and belly stretched her gray silk blouse, making the placket gap between buttons. Her metallic brocade skirt clung to her hips, betraying the outline of granny panties. She had limp curls the color of steel wool and there was a shadow of sweat on her sallow face, even though the air conditioning in the Chief's office was blasting enough cold for a penguin convention. But appearance hadn't kept her from getting elected Mayor three times in the last twenty years; it probably helped. She'd been able to convince voters that brains trumped style.

"I beg your pardon, Chief," she said amiably, "but we were expecting Ms. Hardaway only. This officer would be . . . ?"

"Smick." Stevie tried to look tough when she spotted the visitors, but her eyes went round as quarters. "Behita Berry is my homicide."

"Of course." The Mayor dismissed her with a wave of her meaty hand. "We have no intention of interfering with your investigation."

"Then why are *they* here?" Stevie kept staring at the other two in the room.

"May I call you Fay?" Even though the cops were still with us, it was as if Mayor Sams had closed the door on them. "This is Storrow," she said, indicated a dull gray bot. "And Seeren." The devil was perched on the Chief's credenza, translucent wings outspread like some nightmare shore bird. It weighed in at maybe eleven or twelve kilos, and was sleek as a torpedo, ugly as rust. It turned and I could see my reflection in its compound eyes. There were a lot of me there and none of us looked happy. "Ms. Hardaway, I understand that you and Seeren are acquainted."

Acquainted was one word for it. Seeren had hired me to find a certain Christer a couple of years ago, which I did. That made everybody happy except for a tough named Gratiana, who tried to stab me to death in my office. She was the one I'd seen get disappeared. Of course, it was all hushed up and no charges had ever been filed. Otherwise there might have been riots.

"Seeren recalls with bright satisfaction a previous employment," said the bot. How the devils communicated with the bots was a mystery. All we knew was that the bots did all the talking for them. "Seeren considers that Fay Hardaway has demonstrated true superiority."

"Does that mean I can use it as a reference?" I said it just to hear if my voice would squeak.

The devil opened its maw and made a sound like sucking the last drops of soda through a straw. The bot did not translate.

"Seeren has asked to meet with you in private, Fay," said the Mayor. "Do you have any objection?"

"I do." Stevie actually pushed past the Chief to get Sams's attention. "She's a material witness to a homicide. A devil is a person of interest. These two might be a threat to her safety."

I couldn't help but grin at that. I had gone up against Stevie many times and I doubt that she had ever lost sleep over my safety. But I let it pass; she was giving me time to think.

"Fay Hardaway has the alternative to leave at any time, should such be her intention," said the bot. "Violence is to be deplored. It violates wisdom and thus has unwelcome effects."

That didn't cheer me up much. The devils were big on wisdom, only we had never

figured out what they meant by it, other than it allowed them to kill half the population and rip the hearts out of the other half. But that wasn't violent, no. Disappearing someone was about as violent as blowing out a candle.

"Chief," said the Mayor, "I would think it's up to Fay. Do you agree?"

This had to gall the cops; the devils were the worst criminals in history and they had the Mayor dancing on a stick. "Lieutenant," said C. G. Little, her voice like sandpaper, "I think we have to take them at their word." She rested a hand on Stevie's shoulder.

Everyone but the devil looked at me now. It had turned to the window; I wondered what it could see in the dark. I was tempted to say thanks but no thanks, if only to spite Seeren. That was probably the smart move. But smart and I didn't always get along.

"Sure," I said. "I could use a break from Smick here. No offense, Lieutenant."

As the Mayor closed the door on us, she said, "We'll be right outside if you need us." I wondered which of us she was talking to.

## 10

I shivered.

Not because of the chill in the office, but because I was remembering when Seeren disappeared Gratiana. She had vanished with a surreal pop. There'd been a rush of air, as if the room had gasped in surprise. She wouldn't have had time to suffer. Had she been killed or just sent someplace else—maybe the same place all the men had gone?

"Something is regrettable, Fay Hardaway?" said the bot.

"Been a long night." I told myself then that I was done being scared. I was a PI; I washed my face with battery acid and picked my teeth with ten penny nails. I was mean as cancer. So why did I scuttle around the Chief's desk and sit in her chair? To hide behind it, sure. Keep an obstacle between me and them. A weak move, but now I felt more like the self I needed to be. C. G. was making a statement with this desk; it was not quite as big as a bus. On it was a ship's clock, a silver trophy cup filled with pens and pencils and a framed photo of a kid graduating from somewhere in a blue cap and gown. She looked like a travel-sized C. G. Little. I thought of the Chief as a mom changing diapers all those years ago. For some reason, that helped.

"Before you start," I said, "I have to ask. Was Seeren the devil I saw at the murder scene?"

"No," said the bot.

That stopped me. I was expecting a denial but bots never gave simple answers when complicated ones would do. They had made torturing English into an art form. "Well then, does Seeren know who that devil was?"

"No."

"But there was a devil? Seeren admits that?"

"You asked a permission for one question and have now put three. One needs to remark, Fay Hardaway, that you alone were observer of these events. Seeren has no direct awareness of them."

"But you're here because of what happened to Behita Berry."

The bot let that pass.

I took my sidekick out of my pocket, pressed record and placed it on the desk. "What's this about then?"

"Seeren has intention to task you to make certain inquiries."

"Lucky me."

"You have a client, Maude Descano."

"Look, I'm a private investigator." I shook my last smoke out of the pack. "That

means I like to keep my clients' identities confidential if I can." There was no ash tray so I spilled the pencils and pens out of the trophy cup.

"This information has already been disclosed."

"To the cops maybe." I lit up. "Not to you."

"Seeren has a curiosity in the matter of Renata Descano."

"Renata?" For a moment I thought the bot had misspoke. "You mean Anne."

"The daughter of Maude Descano was Renata Descano."

"She's dead. What's there to know?"

"There are regrettable inconsistencies in the circumstance of her death."

"I heard it was suicide." I tried to picture a woman like Maude having doubts about her daughter's death, but I didn't have that good an imagination. "Do you know different?"

"The purpose of your investigation would be to resolve all inconsistency."

It was easy for bots to stonewall since they had no faces; the devil was busy doing its impression of a brick. "What does this have to do with the Berry murder?"

"This one has knowledge of your previous transaction with Seeren. Are the same terms of employment acceptable?"

I'd earned two thousand dollars the last time I had worked for the devil, which was six month's income in a good year. That was five times what the old woman was paying. But there was too damned much money fluttering around the Descanos and their problems. My nose twitches when a client tries to perfume a rotten case with the scent of cash.

"What do you need me for anyway?" I blew smoke at them. "You've got the mayor sitting on your lap. Have her put the cops on this."

"Seeren necessitates the true discretion that a Fay Hardaway can provide. Never police and never news."

I ashed into the silver cup and considered how much freedom two thousand dollars could buy. I thought about a bigger apartment with a playroom, or at least a dishwasher. I thought about babysitters and dinners out and dancing. "I'm not saying no and I'm not saying yes. But if this is really a problem, I need to see some evidence. Or is Seeren playing some kind of hunch?"

My sidekick chirped; that didn't take long. But I needed a chance to study what Seeren had sent before I made any moves.

"Okay, then." I stubbed my last cigarette out. "I'll sleep on it. Can I give my answer to George? Seeren knows him; he's the bot in my building."

Seeren flapped its wings as it launched off the credenza, then flapped twice more to regain balance on the landing. I felt the air move and caught a whiff of burning sugar. It wrapped itself in its wings and waddled toward the door. The bot Storrow regenerated its legs and arms and stumped after.

As they let themselves out, the Mayor let herself in. Alone. "You have unusual friends, Fay." She shut the door behind her.

"They're not my friends." I carried the cup over to C. G.'s waste basket and emptied the ashes. "I hate the devils."

"I don't suppose you want to tell me what Seeren wants?"

I settled behind the desk and started putting pens and pencils back.

"No." She was thoughtful. "I didn't think so." She sat on one of the wing chairs facing the desk. "We can keep this quiet, at least for a while. Not the murder, but what you saw. Would that help?"

"Help what?"

"Whatever it is that you're trying to do."

I laughed. "I'm just trying to stay sane in this cocked world. I try to do right if I can figure out what that is and every so often I help someone find something she's lost."

I aimed a pencil at her. "Right now I'm trying to go home and sleep and see if any of this makes sense in the morning." I dropped it into the cup. "What time is it?"

She glanced at a fossil wristwatch. "Three-seventeen." Only grannies wear watches. "Past my bedtime," I said. "But try telling that to Lieutenant Smick."

"C. G. Little claims I can trust you."

"Nice of her, but she hardly knows me. What does Stevie say?"

"Apparently she has no use for PIs. She thinks you should have been a cop. We could see about that if you'd like."

"No thanks. The uniform makes me look fat."

She gave me a politician's smile, then leaned forward. "Here's what I'm trying to do, Fay. Word gets out that a devil is a suspect in a homicide—a brutal homicide—and the crazies and the Christers will howl, even though there's nothing we can do. We can't arrest a devil for this; it's like trying to arrest a house fire. Or a tornado. But the old madness is still out there, so I'm trying to stop the riots before we write another damn chapter for Eller's *Index of Human Dysfunction*. If that means I have to tell the world that you didn't see what you saw, I'll do it." She pointed a finger at me, her expression grim as a grave. "And if I have to tell the Lieutenant to arrest you for being an accessory to murder, I'll do that too. Because I don't always have the luxury of doing what's right. Do you understand me?"

I chewed on that but didn't much like the taste. "Sure," I said. "You're saying I'm cocked."

She shook her head. "I hate the devils too, but I doubt their wisdom will allow them to stand back and watch this city burn down. When one of them shows up here at three in the morning, I'm hoping that means they have some kind of plan." She heaved herself out of the chair and looked like she aged a decade doing it. "Since we want that plan to work, we're turning you loose. Do what you do, keep your mouth shut about what's happened and let's see how smart they really are."

"How long do I have?"

"How the hell should I know?" She reached across the desk and shook my hand. "Until you smell smoke."

## 11

Sharifa groaned and turned to me as I slipped under the sheet. "You okay?"

"Yep," I lied.

"Time is it?"

I kissed her. "Half past tomorrow."

"Love you. G'night."

I expected to spend the rest of the night chasing the Descanos around in my head but the kiss of the pillow was too sweet. The next thing I knew, the bedroom was full of sunlight and July's steamy breath. It was eight-thirty; Sharifa had managed to pack Aissa off to daycare and herself off to the hospital without waking me. There was half a pot in the coffee maker and cantaloupe in the fridge. I sat down with the file that Storrow had sent me. It contained three police reports, one each from Missing Persons, a Fifth Precinct detective named Alejandra Urrego and the coroner's office.

Renata Descano would be forty-seven if she had been alive that bright summer morning. Just a few years older than me. She had worked a series of pretend jobs, none of which had stuck: selling toys and shoes and houseplants, grooming pets, waitressing. She had studied graphic design in college, which must have been nice for her. Not many janes our age had the time to go to college. I pegged her as a fluff snoozing through life on a bed of Mom's money. She'd been seeded with Anne when she was twenty-two, but mothering apparently wasn't in her skill set either; she and

the daughter got along like garlic and oatmeal. Maude and nannies raised the kid—mostly nannies, if I knew Maude. Renata had moved out of the mansion on Fairview after a fight with Maude three months before she died. She took a studio apartment at 9<sup>th</sup> and Mayflower—quite a tumble from the Descano lifestyle. The upstairs neighbor reported she was quiet and didn't seem to have visitors. Love life? Unknown. Maude had told Missing Persons that Renata's last relationship had been with a doctor named Kalil Haddad, but that they had broken up a year before she moved out. That checked out. Renata had been unemployed at the time of her death, and as far as anyone knew, wasn't looking for work. Nothing to follow up on there. The sheriff in Lincolnville fished her out of the river eleven days after Maude had reported her missing. Lincolnville was some twenty miles downstream. The coroner's autopsy reported no external wounds although she had five broken ribs, one of which penetrated the aorta. Her liver, spleen and heart were lacerated. All indications were that she had jumped off one of the downtown bridges, most likely the Sanger, some two hundred feet above the river. Jumpers go from seventy miles an hour to zero on impact with the water—not good for the internal organs. Andy—then Anne—Descano had run away from home on the news of her mother's death, but had returned three days later in time for the funeral. I didn't see anything of much interest there either. I did see why Detective Urrego had dropped this one into the suicide file. Renata Descano was unemployed, living in a shabby walkup, had no lover or friends and was estranged from her family. There was no note, but that meant nothing. Less than a third of all suicides bother to explain themselves.

She died on June 4 and was the city's one hundred and eighty-ninth suicide of the year.

I got up and thought about pouring myself another cup of coffee. Instead I went into the bathroom to look in the mirror for the superwoman Seeren and Mayor Sams were counting on to save the city. I couldn't find her, but I did manage to brush my teeth.

I needed to get on my bike and retrieve the stolen Bosch before somebody found it, not that I thought anyone would. I needed to ask Maude about Renata's death, not that I thought she'd have anything new to tell me. I needed a drink, but I'd promised Sharifa I would stop, which meant that nine-seventeen in the morning was too early to start. Instead I wandered into the living room and picked up Aissa's toys.

Although from time to time we retired her playthings to the hall closet to keep from being overrun, there were still more of them than we had bought. Maybe the devils were seeding them at night while we were asleep, and they were giving birth to the next generation under the couch. Aissa's favorites were the Littlers, squat, round, non-toxic people exactly too big for her to swallow. She had enough of them to form a polyethylene commune: grannies, mommies, aunties, police, firefighters, doctors, nurses, mailcarriers, sailors, farmers, kids in every color and shape, as well as sheep, cows, horses, pigs, dogs, cats and, for some reason, giraffes and elephants. They lived at the Animal Friends Farm or the Family Fun House and commuted in the Move-o-matic Bus or a fleet of Gogo Cars. She also had a collection of electronic toys that beeped, burped, squawked, sang nursery rhymes, and counted to ten in English, Spanish, and Mandarin. I dragged a corn popper push toy like one I had as a kid into the corner next to her red wagon and pulled her two ladybug rolling treasure chests out onto the rug and started tossing stuff into them. I was sorting the plastic hammers, screwdrivers and saws of the Handy Ellie Tool Box from the fake stethoscope, blood pressure cuff and otoscope of the Debbie the Doctor Medical Kit, when I remembered that I had copied the names of three doctors from Andy Descano's contacts the night before. I lunged into the kitchen for my sidekick.

Dr. Nicole Fuchs was a dermatologist.

Dr. Katherine Reed was a psychiatrist.

Dr. Kalil Haddad was a urologist who specialized in phalloplasty and sexual reassignment.

12

If the Mayor had not given her blessing to whatever it was I was supposed to be doing for Seeren, I might have waited a day or two to retrieve the Bosch. But I figured the cops would have orders to give me a good leaving alone. As it was I pedaled past the hiding place and locked my bike to a tree in front of Joyce's Convenience Store just up the street. I didn't get to meet Joyce, but I did find a bot who sold me an overpriced ice cream sandwich for a nickel. I ate it sitting on the wall where the painting was. Birds sang, the sun shone. No passers-by stopped to chat, no bots pried, no nosy cops cruised past. A capstone just happened to slide out of place and a priceless art object just happened to find its way under my shirt. I folded the ice cream wrapper up, licked my fingers and sauntered casually back to the bike. I slipped the Bosch into the left saddlebag.

I was sweating by the time I reached the Descano mansion. I wondered if maybe I could convince Sharifa to let me spend a hundred of my retainer on a scooter as I rang the bell and waited. The bot Kirby took his time. The midday sun was a punishment. I knocked again. I waited, then pounded on the double doors. I was getting ready to call Maude on my sidekick when I heard fumbling inside.

I suppose I might have been more surprised if President Gliesman or the Christer Pope or Frosty the Snowgirl had opened the door. But as it was I almost fell out of my shoes when Andy Descano stood blinking at me from the gloomy interior of 122 Fairview.

"Hello, Andy," I said. It's hard to sound nonchalant when your voice crackles like Rice Krispies.

"D'I know you?" The light hit him so hard that he swayed.

"We chatted last night," I said, "but you hung up before I could turn on the charm."

The kid didn't like that much. He glanced past me as if a SWAT team might be hiding in the marigolds or ninjas slithering across the manicured lawn. Then he grabbed my arm and pulled. Since it was one of the arms I needed, I followed it into the house.

The reception hall was stuffy as a bishop's closet. The lights were out and it was dark when the doors closed. Just a smudge of afternoon sun oozed through leaded windows at the landing where the grand staircase reversed direction. It looked like something had tripped a circuit. I was just a sepia shadow in the big gilded mirror; Andy's face a pale smudge.

"Beetle's dead." He'd been drinking; I could've bottled his breath and sold it in Old Courthouse Square for a nickel a nip.

"I guess he won't need that operation after all."

"Operation?" Andy was trying for cagey but looked to be a few working neurons short at the moment. "Don' know what you talkin' about."

"You remember. The one Dr. Haddad was going to do tomorrow."

He folded into himself. "'S cocked." He was sniffling. "'S all cocked up and my fault." When he staggered against the wall, I caught him. There was a lot of him to catch.

"That's okay, girl scout," I said. "Where did you leave your drink?"

He took a vague swipe in my direction and almost pulled the two of us over. "Not a girl scout."

"Okay then." I aimed him down the hall. "Where's Kirby?"

"You." He peered at me. "You're the detective."

“Sure.” We were moving now, but then so were the tectonic plates.

“Did you find it?”

“I find all kinds of stuff.” I didn’t let him see my scowl. “Just now I’m looking for a bot.”

“Gone.” He flapped both hands and giggled. “Flew away.”

The kitchen was the size of a basketball court, a designer’s folly of stainless steel, teak, and hand-painted tile. There was a six burner gas stove, a microwave with more controls than a starship, and a refrigerator big enough to hide a body in. A wallscreen with the sound off played an old sitcom from before the disappearance, something about wacky aliens who weren’t devils and didn’t keep bots. Sleek chrome barstools with leather seats gathered around a semicircular bump in the quartz countertop. A bottle of Crown Royal waited there for Andy next to a whiskey glass in which ice cubes were dying. A silver inhaler had rolled to the edge of the counter. I loaded Andy onto a stool. He slid down but not off. When he fumbled for the inhaler, I swiped it away.

“What is this?” I said, holding it at arm’s length.

He smirked at me. “Manly drugs for a manly man.”

I sniffed but didn’t squeeze the trigger. “Bliss?” I said. “Sugarpop?”

“You know your toot, sister.” He managed to capture the glass before I slid the whiskey bottle out of reach.

“Don’t be like that.” He rattled the ice. “Pour yourself one too, detective.”

I carried the inhaler and the bottle to the far side of the kitchen, and then started opening cabinets. “Where’s Maude?”

“Don’t know. Napping? Shopping? Dead?” There were brushed steel canisters with glass tops near the sink; they were filled with flour, sugar, ground coffee and loose tea. I found a French press in the cabinet above them, filled the beaker with water and put it in the microwave. Andy’s slouch deepened; pretty soon he was going to need a seatbelt.

The microwave timer chirped. I twisted the lid off the coffee canister. I scooped four spoonfuls of rough grounds into the boiling water. Andy watched me stir it. The room filled with an aroma that was first nutty, then bitter and earthy but finally clean, cleaner than anything else in that unhappy house. I didn’t want to think of the things I might do for coffee like that.

“Why are you here, Andy?”

“I live here.”

“Not according to Maude.”

He let that pass. If it had been Dr. Kalil Haddad who had changed this kid’s sex, he must be a master sculptor of flesh. Andy Descano had been rebuilt for power; he could have found work picking up junk cars with his bare hands and tossing them onto trucks. His tight white tank top made it clear that he had had top surgery. Who knew what was underneath the baggy shorts? His feet were bare, showing toenails painted with purple glitter. His skin was thick and oily and he wore his brown hair short enough to show scalp. Maybe he was good looking or maybe he was just young and confident. It was hard to tell with his expression smeared by drugs and alcohol.

“Maude says you moved out. Hopping in and out of skiphouses.”

He glowered at me, breathing with his mouth open. I could hear the whiskey still rasping in his throat; his snoring would be no fun that night. “Cause of Beetle,” he said at last.

“You were sweet on each other?”

“Loved him. Sure.”

“Is that why you stole the Bosch?” I poured him a coffee. “To pay for his operation?”

He shook his head, as if trying to clear it. “Yesterday was my birthday.”

"Happy birthday to you." I saluted him with the cup. "Cream. Sugar?"  
"Black."

I passed it over.

"July 12." When he wrapped his big hands around the cup, it disappeared. "I became a man exactly one year ago.

"Oh, is that what you are?"

He smiled, since obviously I hadn't a clue.

"Not afraid of the devils?" I said.

"Nah." He sipped. "They don't get it. There's more to being a man than chromosomes." He eyed me over the rim of the cup. "Stop staring at that bottle and pour yourself a drink. You know you want one."

I did, but I didn't like that he could tell. I opened the cabinet where I had found the French press and pushed the whiskey onto the bottom shelf with a collection of pricey serving bowls and trays. Weak move, Fay. I closed the cabinet. This kid had me turned around. I decided that I had probably underestimated him; he was, after all, a Descano.

We heard shuffling upstairs and then a toilet flushed. It took the lady of the house about a week and a half to get downstairs.

### 13

Maude Descano wore a blue silk brocade kimono with sleeves down to her knees. She didn't seem surprised to see me, but she didn't seem pleased either.

"I see you've met my granddaughter." She wriggled a hand out of its preposterous sleeve to open the refrigerator.

"Maude doesn't understand about gender either," said Andy. "But then she's a granny."

The granny produced a medicine bottle from under her sleeve, read the label and then shook it. "What don't I understand?"

"Never mind, Nana. I think the detective found your Bosch."

That didn't surprise Maude either. "Is this true?" She opened a drawer and picked out a teaspoon. Andy grinned at me; he was trying to write all my lines. "Sure," I said. "I have it."

"With you?" Maude poured something white and gluey onto the spoon.

"In a safe place."

She dipped the spoon into her mouth and then grimaced. "It was in a safe place before."

Both Descanos thought this was funny. I was starting to feel lighter than air; if they laughed in my direction I might blow out of the doorway and down into the dark hall. "Anne here made the job easy," I said. "She told me where she'd hidden it, although it was kind of by accident."

"Andy." He let his irritation show. "My name is Andy."

It was my turn to grin.

"I never hid it," he said, "and never took it. Was all Beetle, all the time. Should've never showed him it. Never brought him to this dam' house. Never, never, never."

"Who is this person?" said Maude.

"A poor tommy named Behita Berry," I said. "Andy's favorite Beetle. He was in the middle of a sex change and I think they stole the Bosch to pay for it. Only he got dead last night."

"You're a damn fool." The granny turned on the kid. "You and your friends can flay yourself to ribbons and you'll never be men. There are no men."

Andy's fists curled but he said nothing. I wondered what I'd do if he went after Maude. What I *could* do.

"Do the police know?"

"About Berry, yes. That Andy's connected, yes. This is a murder so they'll have to talk to him. About the Bosch, no." I leaned against the counter feeling like I was back in control. "Maybe I can tidy this up but you'll have to help. Otherwise you'll have the law here peeking under your beds and opening your medicine cabinets and there's nothing your connections will be able to do."

"Help how?"

"Start by telling me about Renata."

They goggled at me as if I'd grown another nose.

"You remember Renata," I said. "Someone's daughter, someone else's mom."

"Leave her out of this." Andy shot off his stool and seemed about to come across the counter at me.

"Shut up, Anne." Maude pressed her hands flat against the front of her kimono. "What about Renata?" I could see the outline of her bony thighs.

"You had a fight. She moved out. She was so unhappy that she jumped off a bridge." I watched both of them for reactions. "Unless someone pushed her."

"Nobody pushed her." All the air went out of Andy and he slumped back down, deflated. The suggestion only annoyed Maude.

"What did you fight about?" I said.

"She wanted a great deal of money," said Maude. "I didn't give it to her."

"You seem to get that a lot, don't you? Was this money for Kalil Haddad, by any chance?"

"How do you know about her?"

"Hire a PI and you're going to give up secrets. Get used to it. So she asked for money for her lover?"

"Renata just thought she was in love with her."

"*Hi*," said Andy. "Kalil is a man, Maude." He was going all dreamy and distant on us, as if he were seaside on another planet, where the ocean was Canadian whiskey and the atmosphere pure Bliss. "*I'm* a man."

"She wanted me to set this quack up in practice to take advantage of people like poor Anne here. Confused people. Unhappy people. I told her no. She left me and then Haddad left her."

"You threatened him," said Andy. "You broke them up."

"That's just what Haddad says."

"How do you know what he says?" I asked.

"Because my poor confused granddaughter went to Dr. Kalil Haddad and spent money I had given her for other purposes on an extensive program of self-mutilation. We do talk, you know. She's not always like this."

"You've had both surgeries, Andy?" I still needed him in the conversation.

"What?" He summoned up a sleepy leer. "Want to feel inside my shorts?"

"Why Haddad, Andy? Why choose him for the operation?"

"'Cause he's the best." He was nodding, but not at me. "Ask anyone. Ask this granny."

"Maybe a thumb in Maude's eye too?"

The question didn't interest him.

"Of course she did it to hurt me," said Maude.

"I did it to become who I am." It sounded like something he had heard someone else say once.

"She can't help herself sometimes," Maude said. "But she knows I still love her."

This might have been heartwarming to a family therapist, but I was a PI. "But you didn't have enough money for Beetle to get cut too, so you stole the Bosch."

"The operation doesn't cost that much," said Andy wearily. "He wanted me to steal

it so we'd have enough to pay for the procedure and then go away together while he was healing. Go away, he said, and stay away. I said no, be smart, sure, I can get all the money we'll ever need, but a little at a time. Maude won't care." He folded his big arms on the counter and rested his head on them. "Maude loves me," he muttered.

"You asked her for six thousand dollars. Not so little and all at once."

"I was going to pay for the operation. He wouldn't listen." He spoke with his face turned away. "Doesn't matter anymore."

She came around the counter and rubbed his shoulders. "You're tired, baby," she murmured. "Go upstairs and lie down." She waited for a response, but big Andy Des-cano didn't stir.

"Go."

He groaned when she pulled him upright, groaned again when he stood, eyelids drooping, face slack. She gave his ass a love pat and off he trundled, like a little girl the size of a post office who had stayed up past her bedtime.

Maude settled on a stool and wheeled around to face me. "She has issues, but no more than the rest of us."

I thought she was either being too optimistic about the kid or way too hard on womankind. "You believe that about the friend stealing your Bosch?"

"Why not?"

"How was he going to cash in? Who's the buyer?"

"How would I know?"

"Haddad, maybe?"

She shook her head.

"Andy says your bot is gone. What happened to him?"

Another head shake.

I pulled out my cigarettes. "Look, Maude, either we write our own story or the cops will tell it their way, with you and Andy featured." I offered her a smoke but she waved me off. "It's one thing when someone kills herself. That's just weather to cops, what happens every day. Murder gets their attention. So who took the Bosch and why was Kirby covering it up?"

"Was he?"

"Sure. That's why he's gone." I flicked my lighter and watched the cigarette catch. "Let's say it was Andy—makes sense that Kirby would shield him, at least for a while. So our story is about loyalty, assuming that bots are capable of it. But if Beetle stole the Bosch . . ." I watched smoke curl around my fingers. ". . . well, maybe loyalty still plays. Andy convinces the bot not to say anything when he promises to confront Beetle and get your painting back. But then you hire me and everything gets more complicated."

"Go on."

"Go on where?" I looked for the ashtray that wasn't there. "No matter how the story starts, it ends up with Beetle dead. Who killed him? The buyer? Who would buy it?"

"I've been wondering that myself," said Maude, "ever since it went missing."

"Turn it around." I finally flicked ash into the sink. "Who knew that you had it? Or that it even existed?"

"I've hated the damn thing ever since Nicky brought it home. I most certainly did not show it off." She considered. "Anne and Renata, obviously. Kirby. I don't know who else. Nicky bought it from Sotheby's, but that's long gone. I suppose there could be records somewhere."

"Haddad?"

"Possibly."

I sucked smoke deep into my lungs and pretended to think. "How about the devils?"

"Why would you say that?"

"Why not?" I felt a twinge that might have been inspiration or maybe just a nicotine tremor. "Know any devils?"

"Know?" She made a lemon face. "I've met a couple."

"Like who?"

"The local group. There's Pej, that's the one that Grete Sams meets with, I think Seeren gives the orders. Frems and Kopsie, I don't know much about them. Eller claims it's studying us."

"The mayor told me she hates the devils."

"She probably does. But she lives in the real world, not like Anne and all her tomy friends. This is their zoo, Hardaway. The devils are the keepers and we're the specimens. The bots feed us and sweep up our shit."

If that's what Maude thought, it was no wonder her family went squirrelly. But then it was something I might have said before Sharifa and I had Aissa. "Have any of them ever been here, maybe seen the painting?"

"I threw a fundraiser last summer for the Hopewell Museum. Tents on the back lawn, catered brunch and the Frost String Quartet. The local devils came for the music and stayed for maybe an hour. Grete said it was a goodwill gesture, but they nearly spoiled the party. I didn't see them go inside but the doors were open the whole time; people need to use the bathrooms. You see the devils being mixed up in this?"

"I don't see anything unless it hits me in the face. But this helps, Maude."

"You really have the Bosch? When will you bring it?"

"Tomorrow."

"Then leave, I'm tired." She dismissed me with an abrupt sweep of her hand. "I want this over with, Hardaway."

"Me too," I said. "Don't bother to get up, I'll let myself out."

I couldn't help it; I felt sorry for the Descanos. Anyone could see that Maude was hollowed out by age and disease and still she was spending whatever strength she had trying to protect Andy, who resented her. And what had it been like to grow up and change sexes with sad, absent Renata and steely, arrogant Maude as your two mothers? Mothers and daughters . . . I checked my sidekick and realized that I was going to be late getting Aissa. As I trotted through the house I imagined our daughter at Andy's age. All grown up. Her chances for happiness would have to be better, assuming I could stay out of her way. I was probably more like Maude than I wanted to admit, but at least Aissa had Sharifa to give her what she needed, even if I couldn't.

The reception hall was still dark and close. That bothered me; all the lights had been on in the kitchen. I found a triple switch and flipped all three. Nothing. I opened both the front doors wide to let in some light and then peered through the glass front of the gun cabinet.

One of the handgun mounts was empty.

## 14

I pedaled into the heat of the afternoon as I sprinted across town to pick Aissa up. I still needed to get to the office to tell George that I would take the case and lock in Seeren's retainer. But I also wanted to hear what the bot had to say about loyalty. I wasn't sure it was something he'd talk about; we didn't have that kind of relationship. Or any relationship, really. I didn't hate bots like I hated the devils, but I tried to have as little to do with them as possible. Some people claimed to have bot friends and I'd seen Crazy Martha, the accountant down the hall from me, chatting George up. Then I remembered that I needed to brace Haddad. I pulled over, looked him up on my sidekick, then hopped back on the bike.

“SR Services. This one is pleased to accept your call.”

A bot, of course. “Put Haddad on.”

“Regrettably the press of duty makes the doctor unavailable to take unsolicited calls during office hours. It would be a true honor for this one to deliver your message.”

“Okay then, tell him I’m a private investigator and I need to talk to him about Renata Descano’s death. Tell him there’s a problem with his story. Better do it right now, he might decide he’s available.”

“The doctor’s schedule is most eventful today. Indulge this one and I will make the inquiry.”

I was flying down the hill on Cabot Street when Haddad came on. His voice was so thin that it was barely able to stand up on its own.

“Say again?” I stopped on the sidewalk

“This is Haddad. Your name please?”

“It’s Fay Hardaway, but that means nothing to you. But my client’s name will.”

“It’s Maude Descano, isn’t it? What else does she want from me?”

“We need to talk, Doctor Haddad. The sooner the better, and not on a call.”

“I’m very busy.”

“You, me, and the undertaker. On the other hand, your patient Behita Berry isn’t doing anything at all today on account of he’s been murdered.”

Haddad’s voice lost weight. “Murdered?”

“Beaten to death. So cross him off the schedule for tomorrow. The cops will be happy to take his appointment. I’m thinking we should meet before that.”

“That’s terrible news.”

“It is. Does tonight work for you?” There was a long silence. Maybe he was checking his calendar or maybe he was picking himself up off the floor. “Eight.”

“Where?”

“My office, Ms. Hardaway. As I said, I am very busy.” He broke the connection.

When I unlocked the door to my office, Aissa squirmed her hand out of mine, darted into my little reception room and started pawing through the tired books on the coffee table. She wasn’t interested in *The Book of Art Volume 4: German and Spanish Art to 1900*, or *The Big Book of Famous Women*, or *Behind the Veil: The Christer Scam*, or *A Guide to the World’s Greatest Buildings*. As soon as she found *Heather Has Two Mommies* she hurled herself onto the futon with it. “Read me, read me.”

“I told you, sweetie, I have to work first. You can read it to yourself, like at school. Later we can read together.” I went through the connecting door to my office.

George hadn’t been in his room off the lobby when we came in, so I put my feet on the desk and called him on my sidekick.

“Hello, Fay,” he said. “This one has anticipated your communication. Seeren has mentioned his bright desire to task you to an investigation. Has a decision been reached?”

“It has. Can you come up? I want to discuss something with you.”

“I will arrive forthwith. Do I notice your daughter’s voice?”

In the next room I could hear Aissa piping, “Mommy Jane. Mommy Kate.”

“Yeah, she’s here. Is that a problem?”

“It would give this one true pleasure to offer your child a token of familiarity.”

“Sure, whatever. But we’re only here for a few minutes, okay? I have to get her home for supper.”

I had tucked the Bosch under my shirt; I wasn’t about to leave it in my saddlebag on the street. I wasn’t sure exactly why I hadn’t given it to Maude when I’d had the chance. I suppose because it was my ticket to see her again if I needed to. And be-

cause it was a clue to Beetle's murder that I didn't understand yet. I unzipped the bag for another peek. This slab of oak hadn't gotten any less ugly. The mud-colored devil still had an arrow sticking out of its ass. Touching edges only, I turned it sideways and upside down. If I'd gone to detective school, I might have had a microscope to slide it under, or at least a magnifying glass to examine it with, but I was a self-taught and self-appointed shamus. I was pushy and persistent and I made the rent by working cheap and by taking pretty much every case that walked through my door, as long as it didn't involve Christers. Which meant that the only tool I had at hand was a pocketknife. I unfolded the thin blade, slid it under a paint chip the size of a toenail and lifted. The wood underneath was not blank as I expected. I could just glimpse a herringbone pattern in a smoky blue. I tried a bigger chip, but when I got the knife under it flipped off from the painting with a *snick* and landed tan side up on the desk. *Damn*. If this painting was really priceless, it just got discounted. But what I'd uncovered got my blood singing. It looked very much like the corner of a devil's—*one of our devils'*—compound eye. I scooped the chip with my blade, deposited it on the painting and sealed everything back in the plastic bag. I unlocked the middle drawer of my desk and tried to pull it out quietly, but Aissa has ears like a bat. She was through the door in an instant, Heather and her Mommies forgotten. "My yittles," she said. "Mine."

I put the bag away and locked the middle drawer. We kept a colony of Littlers in the bottom drawer, next to the office bottle of Johnnie Walker. I let her play with her toys while I opened the bar. She liked to huddle under my desk; I told her it was her cave. I listened to her bossing her collection of mommies and daughters and cows around, then slipped a plastic cup off the stack and poured myself a moment of peace, while I wondered what it meant that someone, maybe Bosch himself, had painted a crude joke over a real devil.

I was considering a refill when George appeared in the connecting door to the reception room. I nodded him in, dropped my hand under the desk and wriggled my fingers to get my daughter's attention. "Aissa, George is here."

"Botbot?" she said.

"The bot, yes."

"Cookie?" she said. "Maybe cookie?"

"No, I don't think that George has a cookie today. Or do you?"

"Regrettably not, but this one would be pleased to offer the child this," he said. He extended one of the snaky appendages that served as arms and deposited a figurine on my desk. It was a Littler version of a bot, made of the same gleaming botstuff as George. "My intention is that you will find it appropriate and Aissa Ramirez will find it amusing."

I picked it up, turned it over, passed it between my fingers. I thought maybe I should have an objection, but none came. Bots were as much a part of Aissa's world as cows—more so.

"Aissa," I said. "Look what George brought you." I handed it down and then bent over to see her reaction.

"Botbot." She snatched it from me and immediately introduced it to the other actors in her toddler soap opera.

"What do you say?"

"Denk you, Gorge."

When I straightened up and saw George, I was momentarily disoriented, as if he were not the bot I knew or maybe I was another Fay Hardaway. I had just asked Aissa to thank a *bot*. If Crazy Martha or Abby the piano teacher had given the gift, I would now express my gratitude as well. But the words stuck to my tongue. "So," I said instead, "you can tell Seeren that I'm already working the case."

“Seeren looks forward to a speedy accomplishment.” As he spoke an icon flashed on my desktop and a lonely bank account had a thousand new friends.

I nodded and tapped it shut. “I need to ask you something.”

“My full attention is at your disposal.”

“A bot has gone missing. Name of Kirby, worked for Maude Descano.”

“Yes, such is most unusual.”

“You know about it?”

“This one is a deliberative agent in a distributed intelligence network. While not in continuous communication we are connected, all to all.”

“Any idea where he is?”

“At this time, his location is unavailable to the network. Kirby’s previous masters have been contacted but the query has not provided bright results.”

“Which would be who, exactly?”

“Kirby was most recently tasked to cooperate with Grete Sams. Prior to that he commenced a semiotic inventory of the Hopewell Museum. He was once created to support Eller, who is compiling the *Index of All Human Dysfunction*.”

I liked that, even though it pointed in three different directions. “Okay then, answer me this: Can a bot do something illegal?”

“Such illegal act is imbued with wisdom?”

That was what I was afraid he’d say. Wisdom. The devils kept preaching wisdom, although their idea of it was seriously cocked. Somehow it involved a potty mix of efficiency, values and having things turn out as planned. Of course, nobody was buying ethics from the devils. “Say I stole something. Would you turn me in?”

“While you are assisting Seeren in these matters, I would not.”

“What if I am not working for Seeren?”

“I would take actions appropriate to the circumstance.”

Which was no help; I knew this would be a mistake. “Suppose I asked you to kill someone? No, say a devil told you to.”

“Which individual am I to consider?”

“Anyone.”

“The statistical individual has no intrinsic value, or rather she has a value that approaches zero. That is, if the value of the human species is one, then the value of a non-specific individual is one divided by the current population.”

“One,” Aissa muttered. “One, two, free, foe.” She usually didn’t listen to bots because of the way they mangled the language.

“Thus, if the master’s request, or yours, did not contravene wisdom, I would perform as asked.”

“Just like that?”

“The wisdom would require complex calculation. For example, certain individuals contribute to the overall health of your species.”

“Really?” I said. “Just how did disappearing half of us contribute to the health of our species? Do we look healthy to you?”

“Poopy,” said Aissa and stuck her head out from under the desk. “Poopy, Mommy.”

She presented herself to be picked up. As I slipped my hands under her arms and boosted her onto the desktop, I could smell it. She stood there, preening for George. She took pride in her poops.

I kept a few emergency diapers and a packet of wipes in the bottom drawer behind the bottle. I laid Aissa down on the desk and unsnapped her onesie.

“That action was taken by the masters,” said George. “This one was not then in existence.”

“What action?” I pulled off the diaper and wiped Aissa down. I had lost track of the conversation.

"The purging to which you refer. We were deployed after it occurred to relieve the unplanned distress of your species."

"*Unplanned?*" The back of my neck began to burn and if Aissa hadn't been there I would have thrown something at George, like maybe my desk. "They didn't see the Crazy Time coming?"

"The inexpectation was its persistence over many years."

That's what I got for trying to talk to bots. "Never mind," I said. "You bots are just as guilty as devils." I handed him the wad of diaper and wipe to dispose of. "Unless you disagree with what they did."

"The available data at the time upheld the wisdom."

I stared. "Are you saying there's new data? That maybe this was all a big mistake?"

Trying to read a bot is like trying to read a washing machine. "There is always new data, Fay Hardaway."

"Wait a minute." Sharifa had been sweeping up the scatter of peas and macaroni around Aissa's high chair. Now she turned to me. "You're talking about *Saint Kalil*?"

"The Dr. Kalil Haddad who does sex change operations." I scrubbed hardened cheese sauce out of the saucepan and then dipped it in the dishwater. "Nobody mentioned he'd been canonized."

"He's so ancient I thought he must be dead. I mean he had the surgeries to become a man way before the disappearance."

"You know him?"

"I know of him." She emptied the dustpan into the garbage. "I never met him myself; he left for private practice right before I did my residency. He worked in the ER at our hospital. They said he was a beast, that nobody human could clock all the hours he did."

"Okay, so he was a hard worker. How does that make him a saint?"

"He got the name in the Crazy Time, when everything fell apart and the suicides were piling up in the morgue. They said he would spend days at a time at work, pulling women back from the edge. They trusted him because they thought he was a man, the last man. You know, because he looked and acted like one. It gave him a kind of power that the other docs didn't have."

"Great. So he's a holy man who does miracles. He's still the guy who broke up with Renata Descano."

"But that doesn't make sense. He's got to be in his late eighties, maybe ninety."

I dried my hands on the dishtowel. "What are you saying?" Sharifa was just within reach so I caught her by the waist. "Old folks don't need sex?" I nuzzled her ear. "I've got news for you."

"You're not *that* old." She giggled. "And you get your share, shamus." She kissed me.

It was a good kiss. It had all of Sharifa's style and some unexpected ambition. A kiss that could've gone places, given half a chance. But it was seven-thirty and I had an appointment with a saint at eight.

## 15

I had never met Renata Descano but I had seen pix and vids. She was about my size, maybe an inch taller and a bit bigger in the hips and bust—a girl who wouldn't get blown over in a strong wind. But if she had actually enticed Dr. Kalil Haddad into her bed as alleged, she would have had to be very, very careful not to break him.

On tiptoes Haddad would have stood maybe five four and, if he had been naked and soaking wet, the water might have weighed more than he did. His skin was stretched tight and pale over high cheekbones but was wrinkled around the eyes and

mouth. He had a full head of flyaway white hair but it was everywhere thin so that I could see his pink scalp. His step was wobbly and uncertain as he walked me from the reception room to his office, as if he wasn't sure where to find the floor. However his gaze was bright, alert and disapproving as he settled behind his desk. "*Tick-tick-tick*, Ms. Hardaway. I still have patients waiting."

I'd been trying to think up a clever line of patter, but I was shooting blanks so I just blurted something out. "I want to know why you're talking to me. Because the way you caved this afternoon, I'm guessing you have something to hide."

He was as astonished as I was. "And you want me to just come out and tell you what it is?"

"My wife said that they call you Saint Kalil down at Parkhurst. She's a doctor there. Intensive care."

"What's her name?"

"Sharifa Ramirez."

He leaned forward, tapped at his desktop and I saw Sharifa's pix. "So your wife is Dr. Ramirez and she works in my old hospital. I've never heard of her."

"A devil named Seeren hired me to look into Renata Descano's suicide."

"Seeren?"

"You know him?"

He leaned forward again and spoke to the desk. "Philip?"

A moment later his bot answered. "This one is listening, Kalil."

"Send everybody in the waiting room home. Reschedule them; I'll come in early tomorrow for anyone who can make a six o'clock call."

"Yes, Kalil, is there any other service this one can accomplish for you?"

"Make sure I'm not disturbed. Thanks, Philip."

"You are welcome, Kalil."

Haddad wheeled his chair away from his desk across the floor to an antique side-board. He opened the marquetry cupboard doors. "Do you know anything about port, Ms. Hardaway?"

"No," I said, "but I'm willing to learn."

"I have a very fine 2007 Quinta de Vargellas here." He removed a dusty bottle and two crystal goblets. "If you would carry these over to the couch."

"Renata Descano was a smart, wonderful and deeply unhappy woman."

"Were you lovers?"

Haddad stared into his glass. "We loved each other, yes." He glanced up and saw something in my expression that amused him. "This interests you?" He laughed. "Feel free to speculate on the prurient details. You won't be hearing them from me."

"Fair enough." I hoped I wasn't blushing; it would clash with my attitude. "But Maude didn't approve."

"Maude didn't approve of anything that Renata did, which is why she accomplished so little."

"Andy says she broke you up."

"That boy has never understood his mother's suicide."

"And you do?"

"You ask if I had anything to hide? I do, but nothing illegal, only something I deeply regret. Have you ever heard of a spendthrift trust?"

I shook my head.

"Imagine a wealthy older woman falls ill, say to cancer."

"We talking Maude here?"

Haddad waved a bony finger for silence. "She wants to leave her affairs in order

and provide for the heirs, daughter and a granddaughter in this case, but she has no confidence in them. She creates spendthrift trusts, which disburse specific amounts of money each year, but prevent the heirs from accessing the principal. Usually such trusts are created for minors with the provision that they come into the full amount of money on some birthday, say the twenty-first or thirty-fifth."

"Renata had one of these?"

"Half a million in the trust, with a fifteen thousand dollar annual allowance. Access to the entire trust on her sixtieth birthday."

I thought about my bicycle chained to a lamppost in front of Haddad's office. I thought about my shabby four room apartment. "And that didn't make her happy?" I thought about what money could and couldn't buy.

"I'm not sure what would have made her happy. I never did." His hand trembled when he brought the glass to his lips. "But she found a way to take control of her trust. She wrote her own will, left me a huge sum, and ended her life. My guilty secret is that I have spent almost all of her money on new genital reconstruction technology. I've developed a biomechanical prosthesis that grows directly to the nervous system. Full sensation—do you realize what that means?" He set the glass on the table in front of us. "But . . ." He shook his head. ". . . but had I known what she intended, I would have told her that I would turn the bequest down. I still feel awful when I imagine her on the bridge, thinking of how what she was doing would help me and the work here."

"Maude says that she asked for money for you."

"Maude. . ." His mouth worked as if he were about to spit. "If she did, Renata never mentioned it to me."

Maude Descano hovered in the room for a few moments and we contemplated her malign presence in silence.

"Then about your work here," I said at last. "Andy Descano. Behita Berry."

"My work." Haddad smiled, thin lips tight against yellow teeth. "What I do is make men," he said. "The best I can, at least, given the raw materials I have to work with. I try not to feel guilty when they don't always turn out to be a credit to their gender. Andy, for example. I might not have agreed to metoidioplasty for him for if it had not been for his mother."

I poured the old man a refill. "Why not?" The port had him talking.

"He was rushing things. He'd been in testosterone therapy for just eight months and had already had his mastectomy, hysterectomy and ovariectomy." He flicked a finger against his glass and it rang. "I've known Andy for years. He's impulsive, and even when he isn't, he doesn't always make the best decisions."

"And this metoidioplasty involves what exactly?"

"Lifting the clitoral hood and detaching the ligament from the pubic bone. It allows the testosterone-primed tissues to extend. The head of the clitoris resembles an adolescent glans penis, but it's small and not capable of penetration. That requires phalloplasty with my new prosthesis, which Andy had a few months later." He raised the glass and toasted himself. "He had two very successful surgeries."

"And Berry?"

"Him I did not know very well; he was a new patient. He'd been on T for several years and had developed some fine secondary characteristics—facial hair, muscle mass, a lovely larynx. Had the mastectomy and was prepped for bottom surgery."

"It must be expensive."

"Not at all." Haddad looked insulted. "The whole point of my work is to make sex reassignment affordable to anyone who wants it. We have a sliding scale, but the typical charge for these procedures is just over five hundred dollars."

"Was that what Berry was going to pay?"

“You’d have to ask Philip. I don’t get involved in billing.” He sipped his port and frowned. “I seem to remember something about Andy offering to help Beetle out.”

“All that cutting—you make it sound pretty simple.”

“Straightforward, yes. Most of these are outpatient procedures. Simple, not at all. Sex reassignment is not something to be taken lightly. It’s not a fashion statement and it’s not a way to rebel against the devils. It’s an expression of a man’s true self.”

“But you don’t really make them into men. All the men are dead.”

He stiffened and then set his glass on the table in front of us. “You, of all people, should understand that isn’t true.”

I stared. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Given who you are, I just thought you . . .”

“You don’t know who I am,” I snapped and felt my hands curling into fists. “We just met.” I shoved them into my pants pockets.

A shadow darkened his face but then he surrendered. “All right then. You’re entitled to your opinion; certainly the devils believe there are no more men.” He wrapped his hand around the back of his neck and rubbed. I believed he was about to show me the door, but then thought better of it. “But if they were really all dead, then I would be too. The devils confused biological sex with gender roles. They saw the Y chromosome as a switch which turns on a set of characteristics they called male. But the fact is that both genders share these characteristics. Maybe biological men were more territorial and aggressive on average. Maybe they did murder more often than women.” As he spoke it seemed to me that he got larger somehow; there was muscle in his voice, fury in his posture. “But that kind of gender essentialism gets us nowhere. Women can be territorial and aggressive and they damn well commit murder. The devils tried to extinguish traits *they* decided were harmful by disappearing an entire sex.” He shot off the couch and glared down at me. “But look around you and what do you see? They *fucked up*. Or what do we say these days? *It’s cocked*. Well excuse me, but that’s fucked up too.”

“I never thought of it that way.”

“Then start, Ms. Hardaway. Start right now. I need all the help I can get putting this world back together.”

“And you don’t care if the devils find out?”

“*The devils know.*” He seemed surprised to hear himself shouting. He placed hands against head and stretched the wrinkled skin around his mouth tight. Then he let his arms fall to his sides. “They know what they did and they realize now that they were wrong to do it. Or at least Seeren and his faction have reconnected with wisdom. And even Eller’s foolish *Index* is only intended to justify themselves to themselves against their doubts. A vain attempt to recast history. Instead all it proves is that they’re aliens who got biological sex, gender identity, and gender roles all mixed up. When they disappeared the men, our species began to generate new men. I’m just helping those people become who they already are.” He leaned over to me. “You’re the detective.” He rested the feather of his hand on my elbow. “My god, why do you think you’re here?”

## 16

It wasn’t really a party and I didn’t exactly send out invitations, but I arrived at 122 Fairview in style, in a police car chauffeured by Stevie Smick. Seeren might have clout downtown, but he couldn’t keep the cops from getting their fingerprints all over my case. Stevie had agreed to wait outside as long as I kept my sidekick on record so she could monitor me. I could only hope this wasn’t going to be a problem. Standard procedure was to record all interactions with clients—mostly for my own protection. But it would be bad for business to present the law with a gift-wrapped

basket of evidence against my own client. I had George, the bot from my building, in tow as I climbed the front steps and rang the bell of the Descano mansion. This had not pleased Stevie. Cops and bots don't get along, never have. After talking to Had-dad, I was guessing that it might be a territorial thing.

I'd also asked some devils to stop by later.

Maude had promised that Andy would be home, so I was relieved when the double doors swung away and I saw him slouching in the entryway. He was wearing a Rebels football jersey, cutoff jeans and running shoes without socks. He had his hair combed, his face washed and he looked sober enough to teach kindergarten.

"What's this?" He looked past me at the bot, as welcoming as barbed wire.

I brushed past him and noticed that the lights were on in the reception hall.

"Kirby back yet?" I turned my back to the gun cabinet and waved George in.

"No."

"Found a replacement?"

"No."

"Well then, let me introduce George. He comes with my top recommendation."

"It gives this one bright pleasure to greet you, Andy Descano."

He blocked George from coming any further into the house. "We don't need a bot."

"Really?" I said. "Who'll do the washing up? The laundry? All that beautiful money to dust?"

"Anne, is that Hardaway?" Maude Descano paused at the top of the stairs, like some movie star making an entrance. The granny was wearing a raspberry rose shrug over a cream top and cuffed linen trousers. It was the first time I had seen her dressed. She started down to us, leaning heavily on the curved mahogany banister. We waited. It was a long wait.

"What is this bot doing here?" She glanced from me to Andy.

"I thought you could use some help around the place, Maude. At least until Kirby comes back."

"Don't be ridiculous. We don't need a bot."

"That's what I said." Andy's voice was low and rumbling. I think he was trying for brooding menace, but he just sounded sleepy.

"Did you hear that, George? They don't need a bot. I must have been mistaken."

"This one offers apologies, Maude Descano." He took a step back and bowed. "No imposition was intended."

"Why don't you wait outside? This won't be long." I ushered him through the open doors, closed them, and turned back to face the two women. "Shall we do this in the library?" I said.

"I don't know what you think you're doing, missy." Maude looked suspicious, as if she thought I might have a damnation of devils in my pocket. "But don't try to be clever with me. That's not what I'm paying you for."

"Oh, Maude, why spoil our last few moments together?" I breezed past them toward the library. Andy cursed, and for a moment I was sure that it wasn't going to work, but then I heard them follow.

I settled in the inglenook and lit a cigarette. The Descanos sat together on the bench facing me.

"Have you got it?" said Maude.

I tapped the briefcase beside me. "You know, things would be so much simpler if Kirby were here." I drew smoke into my lungs, then talked it at them. "When you hired me, Maude, you claimed Andy stole your painting. Andy's story was that Beetle took it. Either way, Kirby had to have known. Your grandmother and I have discussed this part already, Andy, but it was after your bedtime. I just wanted to catch you up."

"Just give us the damn painting, Hardaway. Are you worried about your fee?" Maude fumbled a sidekick from the pocket of her trousers, held it close to her face so she could see the screen and tapped it. "There." Her sidekick chirped and a second later mine made the happiest sound on earth.

"Thanks," I said, "but that doesn't solve the problem of the buyer. I talked to Kalil Haddad and he said that Andy was going to help pay for the operation. It was only five hundred dollars, but I was under the impression that your grandson was hard up for cash."

Andy was wary but Maude's face crumpled. "You saw Haddad already?"

"Prompt service is my motto. I thought he might be the buyer, but after I got to know the old gent, I didn't like him for it. So, not only did Andy know where Beetle and the Bosch were, but he probably knew who the buyer was. Yes?"

His stare was flinty.

"But what he didn't know was the reason why Kirby had let them steal the Bosch. You thought it was out of loyalty to you, didn't you, Andy? But it wasn't; Kirby was playing for another team entirely." When I flicked the butt of my cigarette into the fireplace, I could see the ones I'd smoked the other day were still there. These people *really* did need a new bot. "And here's where having our bot friend around would make this case so much simpler. Because something went wrong. Maybe it was Maude hiring me, maybe it was something Beetle did, but Kirby decided he needed the Bosch. And then bad things happened to Behita Berry."

My sidekick began to chirp; I talked over it.

"Was Kirby going to give it to the buyer or bring it back here? Do you know, Andy? No? But in any event, Kirby went out to the skiphouse on Chestnut. I don't think he meant to kill Beetle, he just misjudged how much beating a woman can take. And then a devil showed up—what was that about?" I was losing their attention; I could tell they were distracted by the call on my sidekick. "Excuse me, I have to take this."

It was George. "This one has accomplished the search. It is as you expected, Fay Hardaway. Exit to the back of the house by the water lily pool. There does not exist the possibility of data retrieval."

"Thanks, George." I clicked off and gave them my endgame smile. "So, while we've been chatting in here, I asked George do a little gardening."

And then I was looking at the little gun in Andy Descano's big hand. It was pointed at my chest. I didn't like that much. But Andy wasn't stupid, just young. Nobody here was stupid—I hoped.

"Anne." Maude was horrorstruck.

"I've heard bullets are hard to get." My voice was calm as an atheist's Sunday morning. "How many did you buy, Andy?"

"Enough," he said.

"Enough for me and the buyer too?" I raised both hands high over my head. "Who was it, Andy? The devil I saw that night? Or maybe all of the devils? That would take a lot of bullets, man."

"You're the detective."

"I am." I let my hands sink to shoulder level. "But Maude didn't hire me to solve Beetle's murder. She just wanted her painting back and you protected. I do have an idea about who it is because I know something about why the buyer wanted the Bosch."

This interested him. "Let's hear it."

"Tell you what," I said and let my hands drop. "That gun can't weigh very much but I've heard that a bullet can be as heavy as a bus. A lot of consequences in a bullet. Why strain yourself? Just lower it for now. You can always shoot me after we chat."

"Do it, Andy," said Maude. I wondered if that was the first time she had ever used his new name. "Let's hear what she has to say." She was paler than ever; but she seemed to be gathering herself for whatever was coming.

Andy held the gun on his lap with the barrel pointed at the floor between my legs. "So?"

"So," I said, "the painting that hung over there all these years was not painted on a blank slab of wood. Underneath it is another painting of another devil. One of the interstellar variety."

"How do you know that?" said Maude.

I waved my hand carelessly and gave myself an alibi for vandalizing her artwork. "Beetle must have been in a hurry; he shoved it into a plastic bag and wasn't very careful how he did it. When I checked to see what I had, some paint chips were loose. One fell off. You can see a devil's eye staring through the gap in the surface painting. It's one of ours."

"Okay," said Andy. "So?"

"So I say that points toward a devil or devils as being interested in ownership of this unique historical artifact. Then consider how Kirby came to work here."

"He used to work in the Mayor's office," said Maude. "She sent him to us."

"Why?"

She considered. "She claimed he was an improvement over the general run of bots. Better socialized. More discreet."

"Just so. And before her, where did he work?"

Maude shrugged.

I shook a finger at her. "Important to get references before you hire in help, Maude." Then I realized a mistake I had made at the very beginning of this case. "Wait a minute, what references did you check for me? How did you get my name?"

"I didn't need references," she said. "Grete Sams recommended you."

I didn't like that. I didn't like that at all.

"Go on," said Andy. "Who did Kirby work for?"

Grete Sams had no reason to know who I was, much less to recommend me for a case like this. "The Hopewell Museum," I said absently.

"And why should I care about that?" he said. The little gun stirred itself and looked around.

"Maybe you don't." There is nothing like mortal danger to focus the attention. "But the Mayor was right; Kirby was special. He wasn't built to serve us like most bots. He was created by Eller to assist in compiling the *Index of Human Dysfunction*."

The gun jumped at the mention of Eller and I knew that I had played Andy Descano once again for the information I needed. "So we agree on the buyer?" I said.

Andy nodded, his eyes bright with rage.

"A bullet isn't the way to bring that devil bastard down. I have a feeling that some of his own kind might do the job for you. And come to think of it, you really don't want to shoot me, either. For one thing, there's a cop around the block monitoring us on my sidekick. For another, you really aren't in that much trouble. With Maude's connections, you'll probably get off with just a fine for the bullets. Shooting the bot was destruction of property; I doubt the devils will bring charges, given the circumstances. Why don't you put that gun up and we can all stroll out back and see how things look in the light of day?"

Andy Descano had bought a lot of bullets. Maybe he thought they would make him more of a man. I don't know. I never got the chance to ask him.

The Descanos and I stood at the edge of the shallow grave, looking down at the bullet-riddled remains of the bot, Kirby, that the bot, George, had uncovered. He had

taken quite a few shots to the head. Stevie Smick was the first to join us; she relieved Andy of his gun but did not immediately arrest him. Seeren and Eller arrived soon after.

Stevie and I bracketed Andy as the devils approached the ruined bot. I could feel the kid's muscles go hard as he coiled to launch himself at Eller.

"Don't," said Stevie. "Just don't."

"He did it." Andy's whisper seethed like water boiling. "It's his fault."

"The bot did it," I said. "You got your revenge, kid. Don't cock it up now."

Eller's wings twitched as it took in the mess it had made. Neither devil made any noises that we could hear and whatever passed between them, if anything, George didn't translate. Then Eller launched itself with a *whoosh* that tore at our clothes and stirred the dirt next to Kirby's grave. Andy wrenched himself out of our grip and lunged at the devil. Too late. He staggered around in impotent fury beneath Eller, screaming curses. It circled above us—just out of reach—as if unsure of where it wanted to go.

I paid no attention to either of them. I was watching Seeren. Because I had seen the devil disappear a woman once, I was hoping now that it would disappear Eller. I wanted to believe that the devils' idea of wisdom was within shouting distance of our idea of justice. I wanted a finish to this case that I could take home and put on a shelf in my waiting room for everyone to see. But Seeren gave us nothing and finally Eller banked and climbed to the west, away from downtown.

Then, because he was stupid with grief and rage, or maybe just stupid, Andy turned and punched Seeren in the maw.

The devil was about the size of a kindergartener, just over a meter tall, and Andy Descano could have arm-wrestled a backhoe. The blow flung Seeren off its spindly legs, spinning it backward. Its wings churned and its bullet body twisted as it toppled into a bed of marigolds. It lay there, unmoving.

We froze, all of us, still life with shock. I don't know about the others but there was a roaring in my ears, as if the earth had cracked or the sky had fallen. Had anyone ever killed a devil? Were they even alive? All I could think of was that Eller was missing a chance to add a chapter to the *Index of Human Dysfunction*. Then one of Seeren's wings shivered and the bot George was helping the devil stand and I realized that even though Andy Descano was a headstrong fool, he had acted on an impulse that I and every woman alive shared. He was probably doomed for what he had just done, but he was also a hero. He seemed to realize this at the same moment I did, because he straightened, let his arms fall to his sides and faced Seeren.

A crazy grin spread across his face; Maude was crying. "Been a while since you've seen a man?" he said.

I was certain that Seeren would disappear him on the spot. Only it didn't happen. Instead a lawn sprinkler started up next door and the moment passed and we all remembered how to breathe. George steered the wobbly devil toward Stevie. "Seeren mentions the brightest of requests for transport, Lieutenant Stephanie Smick," he said. "It regrets lacking capacity to fly to any destination at this moment."

Stevie was doubtful. "What about the kid?" She looked past the two of them to Andy Descano. "I should take him in, no?"

"Wisdom dictates that there is no history here," said the bot. "Seeren tasks that person to continue in life."

Andy looked vaguely disappointed, although he had no right to be. The devil might claim that nothing had just happened, but Andy had a story he could tell for the rest of his life. Maude clutched at his arm turned him toward the house. Stevie and George and Seeren were already headed for the police car.

If they were letting it go, then I was too. These were aliens, after all, and we didn't

understand them any better than they understood us. I'd earned my fee, it was another hot afternoon in July and soon it would be time to pick my daughter up at the Precious Life Center. And there was the interest on Sharifa's kiss that I meant to collect. And the rest of my life to live. But I had one last bit of business to take care of.

"Here." I trotted after Maude and thrust the briefcase with the Bosch at her. "This is yours."

## 17

I took Sharifa and Aissa to Salt Bay for a week. I built sand castles for Aissa to knock down and taught her how to put her head underwater and blow bubbles. She stayed up too late and ate too many popsicles and was as happy as any two-year-old had ever been, before or after the men disappeared. It was almost enough to make me forget about the Descanos and the devils and the *Index of Human Dysfunction*. Sharifa bought a new bathing suit and read a novel about a queen who married a dragon. We had asparagus twice that week and made love every afternoon while Aissa napped. I held myself to one lonely drink a night. Whenever Sharifa took Aissa to the playground I would spread my blanket on the beach and think.

Late in the week, I told Sharifa about how Haddad had maybe implied that maybe I was really a man. She listened and then laughed and said that she'd love me no matter what equipment I came with. It didn't matter to her. I knew she was only trying to be playful and make me lighten up, but it mattered to me too much. I thought if I was supposed to be a different gender, then did I have to rewrite the life I had been living all these years? I didn't feel like a man, didn't want to feel like one. I felt like me. But deep into the night as I spooned beside my beautiful wife, a snake inside my head twisted and tried to swallow its own tail. Maybe I was the way I was because I was really somebody else. If Haddad was right then I was in denial. That meant that I couldn't even trust my own thoughts.

Business was slow when I got back to the city. I briefly had a missing teen case, only she wasn't very missing; she showed up the day after the mom hired me. I was sitting on a cushion of Seeren's money, so I didn't charge her. But I told Sharifa I was working the case so I could hide out in the office and keep Johnnie Walker company. I spent the time reading everything I could find about Hieronymus Bosch and studying his devils. None were ours. Bosch had painted at least three versions of *The Last Judgment*. One was in Vienna, another in Bruges. The third had been lost. A large fragment of this last piece had once been in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, but the museum had been burned during the Crazy Time. A smaller fragment now hung in Maude Descano's library. All the *The Last Judgments* showed Jesus sorting the damned from the saved at the end of the world. Maybe being a P. I. was getting to me, but I had to agree with Bosch's count: he painted twice as many sinners as saints. It was pretty to think that on Judgment Day we would find out if we'd lived right or wrong, but I was no Christer. All those stories about hell were just wind to me.

By then I'd wasted several days trying to drink something Maude Descano had said off my mind, so I finally gave up and called City Hall. I left my name with the Mayor's appointments secretary on a Tuesday afternoon. On Wednesday, I lost eighty-seven cents to myself playing solitaire. On Thursday I got a call from some jane who thought her girlfriend might be cheating on her. I biked all the way across town to talk to this person, only to find her screaming at the girlfriend, who was in the process of packing up and moving out. I decided that going back to the office to watch dust settle might give me a drinking problem so I was headed home when my sidekick chirped. Grete Sams had a cancellation at three-forty-five. She could give me fifteen minutes. Did I still want them?

A centerpiece of Mayor Grete Sams's administration was the rehabilitation of City Hall. Built in 1872 in the French Second Empire style, it had once been on the National Register of Historic Places. It had been long abandoned and its three hundred and something rooms had been trashed by squatters and vagrants and women who were just plain angry. She had resisted calls to tear it down and instead had diverted scarce funds to save it. Although there must have been bots on the job, she made sure that the only workers that visitors saw were women. A trio of electricians lifted a tinkling chandelier into place in the lobby and the elevator was out of service because a carpenter was replacing the mirror built into the ceiling. The stairs to the Mayor's office on the fifth floor smelled of sawdust and fresh paint and hope.

I arrived a few minutes before my appointment, expecting to be told that she was running behind and that I would have to wait. But the secretary greeted me as if I were the Queen of Arkansas and ushered me into the presence immediately.

"Fay Hardaway." Grete Sams came around her desk and surprised me with a hug. "So glad you called. You've done wonders, I can't thank you enough. And now we can visit." She propelled me toward a seating area arranged in front of floor to ceiling windows. "What can I get you? Coffee?"

"No, thanks." I settled into a leather chair that was as deep as the Grand Canyon.

"It's after three." On the coffee table in front of us was a tray laden with tumblers and crystal decanters. "Late enough for a taste?"

"I'm trying to cut back."

She nodded as if she thought this was a good idea and settled on the couch opposite me.

I stared at her in silence and let the moment stretch. Sometimes that gets people talking. She just watched and waited me out.

"What do you know about me?" I said finally

"Let's see." She glanced up, as if reading my resume off the ceiling. "You're a P. I. I've heard that you're very good at what you do. I know . . ."

"You heard that where?"

"I know . . ." She waved the question off. ". . . that you're married to Dr. Sharifa Ramirez, who works in the Intensive Care Unit at Parkhurst. I know that you have a daughter, Alissa."

"Aissa. Why did you give my name to Maude Descano?"

She sighed. "Because Seeren asked me to. Or his bot did."

"Why?"

"Do I know why the devils do anything they do?" She shook her head, answering her own question. "Maybe it has plans for you. I understand you've met my friend Kalil Haddad?"

I leaned back into the depths of my chair. "Yeah."

"You probably heard his theory that there are factions among the devils. That one of them now questions the wisdom of disappearing our men." She stared at the decanter as if debating whether to pour herself a drink. "He also claims that there is debate about the way forward." She decided in favor.

"Seeren and Eller."

"Didn't get along." A decanter clinked against a glass; the pour filled the room with the fragrance of Scotch. "Did Seeren find out that Eller was after the painting? Maybe." She took the smallest sip in history and set the glass on the table. Watching it wait there for her was exquisite torture. "Eller has removed to Germany, by the way," she said. "The devils in Stuttgart share his views, although I understand he has abandoned the *Index of Human Dysfunction*." She folded her hands in her lap. "Why do you suppose the devil was interested in that painting?"

I told her what I had found underneath. "But what does it mean?"

"No idea. I'm sure Haddad would have a theory." She was gazing out her windows. "Sometimes I think he has too many theories."

"You called him your friend."

"An ally, at any rate. He does good, but helping people one at a time doesn't solve the real problem."

"The real problem?"

"The devils and the bots stole the future." She heaved herself off the couch and went to the near window. "Come see this view." She stood with her back to me.

I humored her. We were looking east, toward the river and the three bridges, the Memorial, the 14<sup>th</sup> Street, and the Sanger, where Renata Descano had killed herself. Across the river was the snaggle-toothed skyline of the financial district. Two of the tallest towers were mostly empty, and the burnt out shell of the Wetherall was being torn down—another Sams project—but most of the others were occupied. I'd done insurance work for Prudential and Home Court. And beyond the towers was Fisher Park. Home.

"Your daughter, Aissa." Grete Sams gazed down at her city. "How old?"

"Almost two."

"Yours?"

"Hers." Then I corrected myself. "Ours."

"Of course. You're forty-what?"

"Two."

"You must have been seeded."

"And got scraped." The words were stones in my mouth.

"Same as me." She shook her head. "Same." We contemplated our childlessness for a moment. "We're trapped, aren't we? We want children, but not that way. Sometimes I think that's the worst of what they've done. But it's all bad. And it has to stop." She looked at her watch and I wondered just how old she was. Only grannies wear watches. "Listen dear, I've got a four o'clock, so I'm kicking you out now. Just remember, this is going to be a great city again. Your kid is going to be proud of it someday. So take care of your family and I'll take care of this as best I can. . . ." She gestured at the view. ". . . and we'll see what happens, okay?"

I was thinking about what Grete Sams had said as I stepped into the tumult of the Precious Life Center that afternoon. A whirlwind of toddlers was chasing around the center of the playroom, screaming with laughter. Some older kids were off in a corner flying dogs and princesses and cars around a plastic castle. A girl in a cat mask was dancing with one of the teachers to the tune of *Push Pull Stand Still*. If this cocked world that I was born into had to stop, who was going to stop it? Not me. Not Sharifa. Not Grete Sams or Stevie Smick or Kalil Haddad, no matter how hard he tried. We couldn't do it—at least not by ourselves.

We would need these kids.

"Mommy Fay, Mommy Fay." Aissa trundled up and hugged me around the legs so hard that I almost lost my balance. "Maybe bye-bye home peas?"

"Sure, sweetie," I said. "Let's go home." O

Copyright © 2012 James Patrick Kelly

# BONDING WITH MORRY

Tom Purdom

**The author tells us he has “fulfilled one of my childhood ambitions. I always wanted to have an electronic shooting gallery in my own home when I was a kid, and I now do, thanks to the Nintendo Wii and its zapper.” Tom’s ability to enjoy the marvels of today’s world seems to reveal that his latest story—which is about a man who isn’t coping particularly well with tomorrow’s technology—is not autobiographical.**

The legs had been the first modification. The thing didn’t need legs. He lived in an apartment with good elevator service. Wheels would do fine.

“There are still venues in which visitors have to access stairs,” the selection adviser had said.

The selection adviser had been a Thing, too. It looked like a competent, slightly overweight woman in her fifties, but it was a thing just like the thing they were giving him. They probably had fifty selection adviser modes stashed in a store room. *Give Mr. Laren Number Twenty-eight. His psychometrics indicate his comfort state maximizes with mature knowledgeable females.*

“I’ve catalogued my routine,” Morry said. “Wheels will be fine.”

The face had been the biggest battleground. Morry would have opted for a square metal box with sensors and a loudspeaker if they’d let him. Like the robots in most of the comic books he’d read as a kid. But without the sappy friendly look.

“Facial expressions are an important aspect of emotional communication,” the selection adviser advised. “They can communicate, for example, the difference between a minor disruption and a true emergency.”

So he accepted the need for a fully flexible “skin.” They wouldn’t budge on that. But he rejected every offering that simulated a human face, male or female. Cutesy cartoon faces got eleven vetoes before the adviser decided he really was going to reject the entire category. Uniforms, robes, and various forms of historic and unhistoric costumes received the same treatment.

A ninja model tempted him for a few seconds. Black all over. Half the face covered. A reminder the thing could be lethal.

“You are rejecting any feature that might encourage emotional bonding,” the selection advisor said. “Is that true?”

“It’s a thing. A machine. That’s all it is.”

“Most recipients find that a degree of emotional bonding increases their overall satisfaction with the relationship.”

“It’s a machine. You’re a machine. I’m not looking for a friend. I already have friends.”

So there it was. A shiny column planted on a flat platform with four oversized wheels. Three tentacles with metal hands. A square half-size "head." Two lenses that looked like camera lenses. A square speaker with a grill.

"Your name is Clank," Morry said. "You will call me Mr. Largen."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Largen."

The "skin" over the forehead could contract into a frown. The "cheeks" could swell or redden. But it couldn't smile. There was no danger it would smile.

The woman who lived two doors down the hall, Georgia Coleman, called her thing Elly. She had opted for a façade that made it look like a tall bodyguard—like the kind of trim, alert women who hovered around presidents and junketing cabinet secretaries. Georgia went out a lot. And Elly always went with her.

Elly paid the cab driver. Elly helped her up stairs. Elly stayed near her in the ladies' room. Elly's hands could deliver shocks. Elly could kick and punch. And squirt the spray she carried in her shoulder holster.

"Like a guard dog you don't have to feed," Morry had told Georgia.

Georgia smiled. "Elly's a little smarter than a dog, Morry."

"And she talks to you."

"Right now she's teaching me how to play chess. Have you ever played chess, Morry? We started out playing backgammon, but I got tired of that after a month. Chess is something else. I could spend the rest of my life studying the Sicilian Defense."

Cleaning had been the killer app. Morry could get around well enough. But stuff sat on chairs and tops uncollected. Dust accumulated. The bathroom porcelain lost its shine.

"Two hours a day," his (human) Personal Adviser said. "It will probably only be one hour most days once he gets things organized. You'll hardly notice he's active."

"And it cooks, too."

"Basic stuff. He can read the directions on packages and you can tell him if he has to make any adjustments."

It could keep track of his medicines, too. Morry took two anti-cancer pills, one twice a day for three days per week, the second every four days, half an hour before he ate breakfast. He had been keeping the schedule on his handscreen. Now he gave it to Clank. The thing didn't just prompt him. It watched him and made sure he'd really downed the pills. And assured him he had if he started wondering two hours later.

There were specialized devices that could do everything the things could do. Robot vacuum cleaners. Automated kitchens. Little beetles that scurried around your shelves sucking up dust. The "familiarization video" pointed that out. The smart techies had all assumed anthropomorphic robots would always be a fantasy.

But all those devices cost you something. The automated kitchens were a great deal if you were building a new house, but your anthro could work with the kitchen you already had. It could push your old vacuum cleaner. It could even use a broom and a mop.

The video showed military anthros picking up wounded soldiers and carrying them back to safety. Legs could go where wheels stalled. Arms could carry any kind of bundle.

Morry could still button his shirt sleeves, but it took time. Five or six tries, sometimes.

"Can you button sleeves, Clank?"

"Please show me. Thank you. I will download an app."

Clank's hands reached for Morry's upraised wrist. Morry had assumed he would have to wait while Clank searched for the app and executed the download. Instead, the metal fingers closed around the button without a break. Morry held up his other wrist and Clank completed the job with the same smooth efficiency.

He stifled the impulse to say thank you. “I’ll be gone about two hours, Clank. Get the place clean and tidy.”

“I will, Mr. Largen.”

“And tell your marketing department that’s a great app. I can still do it myself, but my fingers aren’t as sensitive as they used to be.”

“I will, Mr. Largen.”

“Would you be interested in an onsite opponent, Mr. Largen?”

Morry had just pressed the On button on his game console. The intro had replaced the Swanalari Rec logo, but the Start screen still hadn’t come on.

“Are you trying to be a companion, Clank?”

“I am offering an option you may not be aware of.”

“I didn’t ask for a companion. I thought I made that clear.”

“I understand, Mr. Largen.”

“Do *they* understand?”

“Your instructions have been permanently installed in my operating parameters. I apologize if I have exceeded the limits you intended.”

Morry eyed the screen. It was almost four years old—half the square feet he could have bought for the same money today. He hadn’t purchased a new game in over a year.

“Can you do anything the game can’t do?”

“In what way?”

“As an opponent. This is an aerial combat game. Can you do anything in one-on-one mode that the game opponent wouldn’t do?”

“Some gamers feel their anthros are more flexible and less predictable than pre-installed programs.”

Morry picked up the extra controller and plugged it into the console. He had ordered the second controller when he bought the game system so he could play with his granddaughter when his family came to visit. Debbie had been a big gamer most of her childhood. Nowadays she mostly played with all the boyfriends a rabid female gamer tended to attract.

“I play this one at the expert level,” Morry said. “I usually fly the Dragonfire with the optional pulse laser.”

“What’s that?” Laura said.

“It’s my personal all-purpose housekeeper and devoted mechanical factotum.”

“Why does it look like that?”

Morry had discovered there were young women—*really* young women—who didn’t automatically shy away from a minor fling with an obvious, unapologetic member of their grandfather’s generation. To them, he was an exotic. They weren’t that common, not for him anyway, but he had learned to spot the signs. He had realized Laura might be amenable fifteen minutes after he started talking to her at the wedding festivities that united one of her senior aunts with one of his more romantic contemporaries. Normally he really did prefer mature, knowledgeable women. But Laura had a great laugh. And he loved the way she moved.

“It’s a machine. I didn’t see any point in pretending it’s something else.”

“It’s not very attractive.”

He smiled. “I may have overdone it.”

“It’s kind of scary.”

“It’s just like all the others. That’s all they are under the cosmetics.”

“The one we’ve got in our dorm—in our dorm suite—looks like it might be somebody’s aunt. That’s how I think of her, anyway. Aunt Claire.”

"I think machines should look like machines."

"You don't think it should look like a faithful sidekick?"

That was the pitch in the ad everybody joked about. Every man's fantasy. A fast car and a faithful sidekick.

Every man's second fantasy, anyway. There was a guy on the eighth floor who was supposed to have opted for a harem girl—a slave girl, judging by the descriptions.

"I'm not a costumed hero," Morry said.

"How about a companion? They're supposed to be good for older people who live alone."

"I've still got friends. I still go out. I don't need a delusion created by a bunch of programmers and engineers."

Laura laughed—the happy soprano laugh that made him feel like she had just thrown out a flash of song.

"You seem to have very strong feelings on the matter, Mr. Largen."

"I think machines are machines. We shouldn't forget they're just machines. Something people make."

"You don't feel you need an *intimate confidante*?"

"Are you volunteering for the job?"

"I'm afraid I'm a bad listener. And you'd have to consider me a temp."

"At my age you have to consider *everything* a temp."

"But you look like you enjoy yourself."

"I do. But right now I have to have my faithful sidekick hand me a useful little pill."

The first symptom hit him just after Laura left. He had gone back to bed, still wearing his bathrobe, hoping he would drift into a nap with memories floating in his head. The numbness in his right arm felt like an unusual, not unpleasant, prelude to sleep. Then it spread to his leg. And he realized he couldn't move his hand.

The thing rolled into the bedroom. "Please lie still, Mr. Largen. I've called Emergency. Your vital signs indicate you may be experiencing the first phase of a stroke."

Tentacles were already bending and stretching over the bed. "I'm giving you a standard injection. Patients who receive immediate care can generally expect a satisfactory recovery. You will be treated well inside the four hour period recommended by the guidelines. Damage sustained within that period can usually be repaired."

It was a comforting statement. And reasonably accurate. Most of the damage to his brain could be repaired. But it took time. Pills and injections could do most of the work nowadays, but the rest of the process required all the dreary exercises and adjustments stroke patients had been subjected to when he had been a forty-year-old husband who thought erection pills were a great subject for jokes.

Nobody stayed in the hospital anymore. You had your own full time nurse at home. Clank moved his limbs during the first stage of the rehab schedule. Clank changed his diapers during the first week. Clank carried him to the bathroom and set him on the toilet from the start of the second week. Clank supervised his exercises. Clank brought him his meals. Clank helped him eat.

A real live meditech stopped by once a week and made sure everything was running properly. A "therapy counselor" supervised his first three hours at home and gave him a weekly "online chat" after that.

Naturally, the counselor thought he might like an "Aide-Companion" that looked more "comforting."

"We can give you a model that keeps the tentacles," the counselor said. "Some people prefer them to jointed limbs. I know your tech does."

Morry shook his head. His tongue still felt thick and clumsy. He worked on his

speech exercises four hours every day, but he avoided talking to people when he could.

“It’s your choice, Mr. Largen. A sympathetic persona can speed up recovery. Every study of the issue ever conducted supports that conclusion.”

“You can . . . use me . . . for . . . control.”

The counselor split the screen and flashed him a video of a thing that looked like a well fed monk with big loose sleeves over its arms. The monk disappeared as soon as he raised his eyebrows—he could still control his eyebrows—and a parade of tentacled charmers danced across the left half of the screen. A cheery visitor from Planet X. A monk with a squarer, more distinguished face. A slim female draped in a gown, tentacles cased in long, stylish gloves.

“I . . . have . . . friends. They . . . come. Ev . . . ry day.”

“I understand, Mr. Largen. But I believe you’re alone most of the day.”

“Clank . . . talks. I practice . . . con . . . ver . . .”

He struggled with the word and gave up.

“I’m only offering you some alternatives to consider,” the counselor said. “Emotional affect can be a subtle factor, but it’s real.”

“I . . . like . . . Clank. Clank . . . is . . . my friend.”

It had been a spur of the moment inspiration, but it worked. The counselor switched to her exit script and popped off the screen two minutes after he said it.

His daughter shook her head when he told her about it. They normally kept in touch through the usual postings, but she had started calling him twice a week, on a schedule. She was a rehab specialist herself and she felt he should “get some benefit out of the money you invested in my education.”

“I’m not sure that was a nice thing to do,” Julie said.

“It . . . did . . . the job.”

“Your counselor is just trying to help you. And that thing is pretty ugly. I wouldn’t want it hanging around my bedroom after dark.”

“They’re . . . all . . . like that. Underneath.”

“And we’re all skeletons and skulls underneath.”

“Personalities . . . Julie. Real . . . feelings.”

“But how do you know that, Dad? How do you know I have feelings?”

Morry’s mouth twisted into a caricature of a smile. “I know . . . how you . . . started. I was . . . there.”

People always said that. How do you know other humans feel things? Don’t you just go by what they do and say? And assume they feel the same things you feel?

How do you know robots don’t develop feelings when their brains get this complicated?

There were even people who wanted to give the things rights. Two big organizations. One group thought they should have the same rights as animals. Don’t over-work them. Let them have some liberty. The other group thought they should get the vote.

But how could you tell what the things wanted? Could you even assume they had wants?

“Do you feel . . . you’re over . . . worked, Clank?”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand the question, Mr. Largen.”

“Do you . . . want . . . to . . . work less?”

The brows contracted. The head tipped back—as if it was contemplating a thought.

“I’m here to help you, Mr. Largen. I’m here twenty-four hours a day. Seven days a week.”

\* \* \*

The thing could have called him Dr. Largent, but he had started separating himself from that usage the day he retired. His students had called him Doctor for forty-three years and he had preferred it to the alternatives. It sounded breezier than Mister and less pompous than Professor. But nowadays he was just an ordinary Mister to everybody who didn't call him Morry. He didn't plan to spend his retirement disillusioning people who were looking for free medical advice.

He didn't have any problems with technology either. He still bristled when he ran into people who assumed you were a technological incompetent just because you were so old you had earned your doctorate when computers still filled small rooms. He had started working with a desktop when a machine with a 128K memory was a technological wonder. His first foray into computerized scholarship had been a database housed on a punched card mainframe—a month by month analyzable record of all the economic transactions posted in a New Jersey canal town between 1811 and 1821.

"Machines are just . . . machines . . . Clank. You're just a . . . tool . . . created by people. *Real* people. With real . . . feelings."

"Why don't we try a bridge game some evening?" Georgia Coleman said. "Elly and me against you and . . . Clank."

"How about you and me . . . against the things?"

"We wouldn't stand a chance. They never forget a card, Morry."

"We could . . . cheat."

Georgia even set up a table with three chairs. Elly sat on a chair just like she had legs that needed to rest. Clank eased the front edge of his platform under the table and bent his tentacles at a sharp angle so he could hold his grippers poised at the right level.

"It's a good thing we aren't playing poker," Georgia said. "I wouldn't have the slightest idea what Clank was feeling. Don't you agree, Elly? Can you interpret Clank's feelings?"

"I don't see important signals," Elly said.

Morry noted that Georgia had automatically rephrased her question so a machine could interpret it. *Don't you agree with what I just said* had become *Can you interpret Clank's feelings?*—a clear, limited interrogation.

"That's a great . . . response," Morry said. "I'm im . . . pressed."

Georgia frowned. "She just said she can't read Clank's face. That's pretty obvious, isn't it?"

"She could have . . . just said no. Instead her programs . . . searched backward. Through all . . . the things you've said. And . . . associated . . . your question . . . with Clank's . . . responses."

"Is that how you see her, Morry? As a bunch of programs?"

"They're . . . masterpieces. I'm not a . . . computer geek. But I've worked . . . with computers. Forty-plus years. I understand . . . what it takes. Spacial visual . . . ization. Speech recog . . . nition. They're incred . . . ible."

He liked Georgia. She had actually run her own business—a publicity and promotion agency that freelanced for small performing arts organizations. She knew some funny stories. She was competent. She still had a waistline. But they never played bridge again.

He still had to use a walker around the apartment. He could use his legs, but he had to worry about falls. Falls could be catastrophic at his age. You never got back to where you were.

He could have controlled a motorized wheelchair when he went out, but his insur-

ance plan wouldn't pay for it. He already had a device that could push a wheelchair anywhere he wanted to go.

"That's the advantage of an anthro, Mr. Largen. It eliminates the need for a lot of expensive specialized equipment."

He didn't mind the wheelchair, but he did notice the stares. Clank bothered people.

"I think it's mostly that face," one of his after-theater friends said. "You really should do something about that face."

They were sitting inside a crowded little ice cream shop, two guys who liked to talk and a woman who seemed to like to listen. He had left Clank on the sidewalk, guarding the folded-up wheelchair, and grabbed the backs of chairs as they worked their way to a table.

"It's a halfway thing," his friend said. "It's just enough like us to make us feel like it's human. But it doesn't go all the way. It makes us feel creepy."

The woman nodded. "It looks like a disfigured human."

So he gave the standard heads another look. And settled for the blandest, plain vanilla robot in the catalog. It could smile—there wasn't anything he could do about that—but it was a limited, minimal smile. Most of the time it just looked alert.

He had to pay a "cosmetic replacement" fee, of course. They only let you have the first head free.

"I'm tempted to ask you how like it, Clank. But I think I'll resist the impulse."

"You speech quality is registering within normal parameters, Mr. Largen."

"But it's slower than it used to be. And I'm making a bigger effort."

"You are progressing faster than 86 percent of the patients who start with your initial level of dysfunction."

"I'm in the eighty-seventh percentile?"

"Yes."

"Grab a game controller, Clank. I can use some recreational therapy."

Georgia Coleman commented on Clank's new face when he met her in the lobby. His daughter liked it, too.

"That old face was a *very bad choice*," Julie said. "It's the worst choice you made, in my professional judgment."

"You seemed to put up with it."

"I don't call you to nag you, Dad."

"And it wouldn't do any good if you did, right?"

"You know the arguments just as well as I do. You're living alone. Some kind of simulated companionship can be helpful. Conversation sessions can speed up speech recovery."

"That's not the issue. It's the emotional bonding I object to. Pretending a machine is a person."

"I understand that. But do you have to go to extremes?"

"I'm a sentimental creature, daughter. Who knows what I'd do if I had a thing that looked like a cute pet? There were times when I even felt sorry for some of my students."

"So you're living with a metal monster just because you're worried about your own feelings?"

He smiled—a lopsided smile, but his smiles had always had a touch of wryness.

"Is that your professional judgment, too?"

He deleted most of the stuff the Foundation for CyberAmerican Rights dumped in his inbox. But he couldn't resist discussing some of it with Clank.

"Are you happy with your appearance, Clank? Do you feel I've disfigured you?"

"My appearance sometimes disturbs people, Mr. Largen. Most humans prefer an-thros that resemble organic creatures or familiar fantasy characters."

"But do you like it? These people say I'm abusing you. They say you have a right to an attractive appearance."

"I cannot express an opinion on the question of CyberAmerican Rights, Mr. Largen. I can discuss the issues with you if you'd like."

"Do you have an opinion?"

"The GNX Corporation and the agencies responsible for your health care services have no official position on the issues raised by organizations such as the Foundation for CyberAmerican Rights."

"And therefore *you* don't have an opinion."

"I can only repeat what I just said, Mr. Largen."

The representative from the Foundation for CyberAmerican Rights was a lawyer who looked like he might be a few years past retirement age. Morry's ID app posted a preliminary bio as soon as the lawyer's name appeared on his handscreen. Donald Weinbragen had spent most of his career working for the American branch of a Japanese automobile company. He had reached the peak of his career, three years before his retirement, when he had been granted a title that proclaimed he was the Senior Counsel for Cross-Border Contract Interpretation.

"I apologize for the disturbance, Professor Largen. We've found that it's generally best to initiate discussion with a direct personal contact, without any preliminary mailings."

Morry nodded—the smallest, most non-committal nod he could produce. He had learned a few things during all the years he had dealt with administrators and faculty committees. Anything you say can be used against you. They will say what they have to say.

"We've received an abuse complaint. With regard to the CyberAmerican you address as Clank."

Morry nodded again.

"Our organization is committed to the idea that CyberAmericans have certain rights. One of them is the right to an attractive appearance. They also have the right to be treated with the same respect we normally accord organic citizens. That includes the right to be addressed by names that reflect their proper status."

"You're calling me because somebody doesn't like its *name*?"

"Clank is obviously a name designed to impose your belief that your aide-companion is only a machine. We also have reason to believe you have forced your aide-companion into a grotesque, unattractive body for the same reason. Our report on this matter includes several statements from people who have heard you say you chose your companion's name and configuration with that aim. We have accumulated enough documentation to initiate legal action, but we would like to avoid that if possible."

"Are you trying to tell me I've done something illegal?"

"The law does not—yet—recognize the full rights of CyberAmericans. But we believe the courts will uphold their claims. We are prepared to take abuse cases to the highest levels of the judiciary."

Julie liked the new look. "You really went all out, didn't you? Square jaw. Blue eyes. I've got friends who'd kill for a brute with those shoulders."

"They might be disappointed with his capabilities in other areas."

"The new name fits him, too. That was a stroke of genius, Dad. You change one letter and you get a name that fits him like a glove."

Georgia Coleman's eyes widened when he ran into her while he was waiting for the elevator. She actually shook hands when Morry made the introductions.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Clark. You look quite handsome. You and Elly would make a beautiful couple."

"Are you suggesting we arrange a date?" Morry said.

"It's a big improvement, Morry. I think you'll find most of the people you know will be glad you gave the poor thing an appearance that doesn't make them shudder."

"It was a pure no-brainer. I could give the glorious humanitarian foundation what it wanted or I could spend the rest of my projected lifespan sitting in courtrooms and paying lawyers."

"You made the right decision, Morry. I'm certain Clark is much happier. I know Elly would be."

Morry turned around in his wheelchair. "Are you happier now, Clark?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand the question, Mr. Largen."

"Do you like your new appearance? Do you like having legs and arms? Do you like your new name?"

"The name and appearance of an anthropomorphic aide is a matter of customer choice. The GNX Corporation believes both matters should be left to the discretion of the customer, within the broad limits of efficiency and customary standards of public decorum."

"They always say that," Georgia said. "Everybody knows they've been programmed to say that."

"They've been programmed to say everything they say, Georgia."

"Not like that. That's a word for word scripted response."

The light flashed over Elevator Three. Georgia pivoted toward it with her body-guard at her heels and Morry noted the suitcases propped beside the two people who were already on board. He raised his hand a mini-second before Clark reached the same decision and stopped pushing.

The door closed behind Georgia and Elly. Clark poked the Down button.

"I have a terrible feeling that may have been a saved-by-the-bell situation," Morry said.

"Saved by the bell?"

"It's a term from boxing—the sport. It means you were caught in a bad situation, but you got out of it because the bell rang the end of the round. The less I see of Georgia, the better."

"Are you advising me you have negative feelings about Georgia Coleman? Shall I take that information into account in the future?"

"Let's just say it might be best if I limited the duration of my contacts with her. I don't know who filed that complaint with the great protector of your rights. But I have my suspicions."

The final downward slide started—as it often did—with a minor event. The kind of thing he could have survived if he had been a young stud in his fifties. Clark was pushing him along a peaceful little tree-lined rowhouse street, two blocks from his apartment building, when a motorboard pack rolled around the corner, five steps behind them.

It was the latest fad among the more hyped-up young. Most of the time they just made a lot of noise or scattered a few pedestrians. This time they felt they had to outmaneuver Clark and land some jabs on the better-off-dead in the wheelchair. They even had different colored glop on their hands, so they could check their videos afterward and see who had actually connected.

Clark blocked most of the blows, but they came in fast and they had him outnumbered.

bered six to one. Morry took a punch on the chest and a hard backhand slap on the temple.

At ninety-six, as they said, you had lost a lot of your ability to recoup. And the things they did for you had their side effects. He was living in a great era. Afflictions that could have killed him when he was young could be treated. But most of the treatments were still new. They still had effects the labs hadn't learned to counter. There came a time when you knew it was a losing battle. When you knew it was time you told them they could stop pummeling you with antidotes to the antidotes.

The hospice nurse was a slim young woman who turned out to be a grandmother who was probably approaching sixty. She stopped by twice a week, for twenty minutes, to make sure everything was working as it should. Julie called him twice a day. The rest of the time he was alone with Clark.

Clark made his meals—such as they were. Clark worked the controls on the entertainment center. Clark kept him clean. Clark laughed at his jokes and listened when he felt like reminiscing.

Georgia Coleman sent him messages. He was lucky he had “someone like Clark.” Everyone in the building was talking about the wonderful job Clark was doing.

Clark would never look as sensitive as the hospice nurse. He had a male face. He looked efficient—businesslike. But that was all right. That was the way Morry wanted it. He had made a rational open-eyed decision. He had lived his life and now it was ending. He didn’t need tears. He didn’t need people acting like his death would create an irreparable vacancy in their lives.

He knew he was getting near the end when he slept through a whole movie. And didn’t really care. He hadn’t eaten in four days. That was one of the hospice rules. No forced feeding. The next time he drifted off, he might not wake up.

It might have been nice if Julie had been there. But she had a life to lead. Why should she waste some of the good days she had left sitting beside his recliner?

And he wasn’t alone. He wouldn’t die alone. Nobody was ever really alone anymore.

He lifted his left hand off the arm rest—just high enough to make a visible gesture. Clark’s face loomed over him. The last face he would ever see.

He didn’t have to raise his voice. Clark could adjust his hearing. Clark had routines that could enhance garbled words.

“Tell the programmers . . . and the . . . engineers . . . they did a great job. All of them. Everywhere. All my life.”

Clark’s face froze. Morry stared at him through a haze that seemed to be darkening by the second. The smile that ended the freeze was a thin Clark smile, but he could still see it through the fog.

“They said to tell you thank you. They appreciate the thought.” ◎

Copyright © 2012 Tom Purdom

## VISIT OUR WEBSITE

[www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com)

Don’t miss out on our lively forum, movie reviews, podcasts, controversial and informative articles, and classic stories.

**Log on today!**

# SEXY ROBOT MOM

Sandra McDonald

**Sandra McDonald's award-winning collection of short stories, *Diana Comet and Other Improbable Stories*, was a Booklist Editor's Choice and an American Library Association "Over the Rainbow" book. In 2011, two of her stories made the James A. Tiptree Award Honor List. Her latest books are a series of adventures for gay and straight teens set in the Florida Keys. She tells us that her new story started with the idea of "sexbot with baby" and ran away from there.**

Scott said that Alina was his favorite smashup between a sexbot and a toaster oven, but Alina disagreed. Although she shared the same buxom brunette shell as the 7832BNX7 series, she hadn't been given a clitoris, vulva, or vaginal port. Her programming included only the most rudimentary knowledge of human sexual practices. On the other hand, her expandable womb was adjustable for time and temperature, had a durable protective shell, and could wirelessly transmit information the same way any kitchen appliance could.

"I think I'm much more toaster oven than sexbot," she said as he adjusted her left nipple tube.

"Trust me." Scott snapped her areola back into place. "Parents look at you, they see inflatable doll and not melting pizza. That's why they had to frump up the rest of your series."

Alina glanced at the other units getting serviced in the maintenance bays of *New Human, More Human*. Some had oily hair (undesirable) or asymmetrical facial features (acceptable within certain parameters) or deliberately crooked noses (unacceptable). "I was the first?"

"You're number seven," he said, floppy bangs hanging in front of his blue eyes (very desirable). "Lucky seven."

"I don't remember the others."

"No, you're not equipped with long-term memory." Scott stepped back and gave her a wide grin. "Go ahead, squirt me."

She loaded her breast with saline from an internal reservoir and took aim. The fluid hit his lab coat. Scott spread his arms, delighted. "There's my girl. You're all set. Inspected, warrantied, and ready for your next implant. See you in nine months."

Alina buttoned her pink blouse, straightened her floral skirt, and walked herself down to the Impregnation Department. Six-foot-tall photographs of happy babies and their parents hung on the cream-colored walls. Dr. Oliver Ogilvy, who was tall (desirable for men) but had a weak chin (undesirable in either sex) brought her into

his office. Awards and plaques dotted the walls, and the windows overlooked the Hudson Valley.

"This is Mr. and Mrs. Crowther, Alina," he said. "They like your profile. Eleven successful terms."

"That's quite impressive," said Mr. Crowther, jovially. He was middle-aged, with thick artificial hair and well-tailored clothes.

Alina shook his hand gently. "Thank you, sir," she said, although she had no knowledge of previous pregnancies. She was programmed to believe whatever Dr. Ogilvy told her.

Mrs. Crowther, short and slender (both characteristics desirable in females, but not in excess) folded her arms across her chest. "Ninety-nine months pregnant. Doesn't it . . . get stress fractures or something? All that expansion and contraction?"

Dr. Ogilvy leaned back in his leather chair. "The womb is built for flexibility. The torso was specially designed to expand in proportion to your child's development."

"And it walks around while pregnant—while it's incubating?" Mrs. Crowther asked.

"We call Alina 'she,'" Dr. Ogilvy said. "It humanizes the experience for you. Yes. She'll be walking around. She'll be living with you, consuming food at your table to process for your child. She'll interact with you both on a daily basis. Your family and neighbors will get to know her. You might even have a baby shower."

Mrs. Crowther flinched. "Baby shower? For a robot?"

"For you, honey," Mr. Crowther said. "She's just carrying it, but you're the mom-to-be. You'll be the center of attention. I promise."

Alina's decision trees told her it would be appropriate to nod, so she did.

Mrs. Crowther looked doubtful. "Maybe we should just let the machines carry it here. I don't know if I want it in my house. It—she—seems so bland."

The chair under Dr. Ogilvy creaked as he leaned forward. "She doesn't have a personality profile loaded yet. You choose the options. Shy, extroverted? Witty, educated, quiet, unobtrusive? You pick her intelligence level and hobbies. Her last couple wanted her to speak Italian and excel at cooking."

"I can cook just fine," Mrs. Crowther said bitterly. "I just can't get pregnant again. We've been trying for twenty-seven months now."

"That's exactly what Alina is for," Dr. Ogilvy said smoothly. "Think about it, Joyce. Nine months from today, you could be holding your son or daughter. Your waistline won't change an inch. Your hormones will be steady and calm. You won't have the trauma of childbirth or the risk of post-partum depression. Your child will be brought into this world in a safe, secure, extremely successful robot incubator."

Mr. Crowther put his arm around his wife's shoulders. "Sounds ideal to me, sweetheart."

Mrs. Crowther lifted her chin. She gave a tiny nod.

Alina was impregnated the next day. The fertilized egg instantly attached to her artificial endometrium and began to divide. Forty-eight hours after that, she was loaded into a van, transported across the continent, and delivered to the Crowthers with a blue corsage pinned to her wrist. The corsage held a handwritten note from Dr. Ogilvy: "Congratulations on your future baby boy!"

Mr. Crowther said, "Let's name him Owen," and Mrs. Crowther said, "Show it to its room."

The Crowthers' house was a two-story Mediterranean-style villa with hardwood floors and oil paintings of rustic landscapes. Alina's room was on the second floor, adjacent to the nursery. She wasn't allowed in the nursery. Her room had a bed, although she didn't require one. It had a walk-in closet where she kept a different skirt and blouse for every day of the week. Her breakfast was delivered every morning,

each meal perfectly calculated for the fetus's benefit. After eating, she sat in a rocking chair by the window and gazed at the crystal blue swimming pool below. No one ever swam in its waters—not in the winter, when the hills were brown; not in the summer, when the hills were still brown and the maids complained of drought.

Lunch was delivered promptly at noon. Afterward Alina emptied her waste port and returned to the chair again. She didn't think or dream or speculate; she didn't grow bored or restless or impatient; she had no insecurities to wrestle with, no resentments to harbor, no agenda to pursue. She monitored the fetus and adjusted hormones, nutrients, and antibodies as needed. She watched the faint ripples of pool water when the pump kicked in. She analyzed the colors in its depths as sun moved across the sky.

Late each evening Mr. Crowther would gather her at dinner. They ate in the large kitchen, with its gleaming marble counters and heavy smell of spices. Mr. Crowther asked about the baby and talked about his own childhood growing up in Schenectady. He would put his hand on her growing stomach and listen to her project the baby's heartbeat through a speaker in her chest. He apologized for Mrs. Crowther.

"We had a daughter, but she drowned," he said. "And another, but she was still-born. You're our third chance at happiness. Maybe having a boy will bring good luck."

Alina had been programmed for optimism. "I'm sure it will, sir."

In her sixth month, after a dinner in which he consumed a bottle of wine, Mr. Crowther walked Alina back to her room and, once inside, leaned forward until his mouth was only inches from hers. His skin was flushed, his pupils wide. "Do you mind . . . I mean, I know you don't . . . but would it be okay for me to kiss you? Could I do that and you wouldn't tell Mrs. Crowther?"

"I'm programmed to be honest if she asks," Alina said.

Mr. Crowther kissed her anyway. She measured the pressure and temperature of his lips and waited for him to stop.

"Well," he said, eventually. "Body of a sexbot, demeanor like a cold fish."

"Yes, sir," she replied.

On the fourth day of her thirty-fifth week, her womb transmitted a completion signal to Dr. Ogilvy's office. A midwife-technician arrived six hours later. Alina stretched out for the first and only time on the bed in her room. Mr. Crowther entered his identification code. Mrs. Crowther entered hers. The skin over Alina's belly slid back to reveal a hatch, and the hatch popped open to reveal baby Owen squirming in a puddle of earthy-smelling fluids. Alina could have reached down and cut the cord herself, but the technician did it.

"Congratulations!" The midwife lifted Owen and deftly began to clean him. "Happy birthday, Mom and baby. Do you want Alina to nurse him, or is she coming back with me?"

"We have formula," Mrs. Crowther said. "Take it back."

The next morning she was back in the maintenance bay, her milk extracted and recycled. A technician named Scott flushed out her nipple tubes. He said she was his favorite mashup between a sexbot and a toaster oven.

"I've never heard anyone say that before," she said.

"You're not programmed with a long-term memory." He stepped back and said, "Okay, let's see how your aim is. Hit me with both barrels, baby."

She took aim and soaked the front of his jacket.

"Excellent," he said. "Go get knocked up, and we'll see you in nine months."

Dan Poole and Mark Dubay were a gay couple who paid for an egg from an anonymous donor. They each provided sperm but asked the laboratory to randomly pick whose would get used. "She's going to be both of ours regardless," Mark said confidently, and Dan agreed, and so Alina was forbidden from revealing that it was Dan's

DNA she could detect in the fetus. Both men were of African descent and the egg had come from a similar donor. Alina mixed up hot chocolate and added just enough cream to illustrate the baby's probable skin color.

"Our little *café au lait*," Dan said, which is how the baby earned her nickname.

Their house was a large, L-shaped ranch set in the countryside of central Georgia, surrounded by forests and streams. They both worked from home. Greenhouse science, they said. They had opted for her to be energetic, polylingual, knowledgeable about wines, and good with dogs. Every day Alina took a long walk with either Mark or Dan and one of their three Dobermans.

"Are you happy being a pregnant robot?" Dan asked one day as they walked along a stream.

"Yes, sir."

"Really?" Dan threw a stick for one of the dogs to fetch. "Can you be happy?"

"I'm programmed to say it and portray it in appropriate circumstances," she replied. "You seem eager for me to say yes, so I said yes."

"But you don't have any emotions of your own."

"No, sir. My series was not approved for emotion chips."

The summer woods edged to fall and then winter, with snowfall so heavy that it blocked the road to town for two weeks. On the first day of Alina's thirty-fourth week, the Womb Alert announced Au Lait's readiness. Dan entered his code without error, but Mark was so nervous he hit the wrong numbers twice and nearly locked her womb. Baby Au Lait, now named Sonora, emerged healthy and kicking. Mark and Dan retained Alina to breastfeed her for six months. She also changed diapers, burped the baby, and rocked her through sleepless nights. But she didn't love her, because how could she?

One day, Mark said, "Alina, we want to have another baby. You have to go back to the lab for the implant, but they're not going to erase your memory of us. You're coming right back here with a son. We've already nicknamed him Con Leche."

"That's excellent news, sir," she replied.

Once she was back in the lab, Scott flushed out her systems and adjusted her nipple tubes. Bent close to her, his breath hot on her skin, he said, "You're my favorite offspring of a toaster oven and a sexbot."

Alina tilted her head. "You told me that the last time you serviced my nipples. They seem to require much maintenance."

He abruptly stopped fiddling. "Did I? Maybe I should check your waste port instead."

Later she reported to Impregnation. The donor egg had already been fertilized with Mark's sperm. Alina climbed into a transfer chamber and went into rest mode. A subroutine monitored the successful implantation of the egg into her womb. Shortly afterward, her external sensors recorded the dimming of the light over her chamber. The power feed snaking up into her foot abruptly spiked, and an emergency command was fed into her central processing unit: START STASIS.

Alina and Con Leche both went to sleep.

Thud, crack, thud, crack. Alina opened her eyes. She was in a dark transfer chamber. Above her were dim pinpricks of light, distant and shifting as something made noise and dug toward her. The external temperature measured below freezing (inhospitable to human life) and after a few milliseconds she concluded the chamber was buried by ice and snow.

No decision tree offered an advantageous course of action. She opted for inaction, and counted thuds and cracks until a shovel hit the plastic a few inches above her face. Soon a human face was staring down at her. The face was asymmetrical (unde-

sirable) and damaged by sun and wind (regrettable). Snow goggles covered the eyes and a parka hood hid the human's hair and chin.

Alina waited patiently until the human broke through the shield.

"Are you awake, or just staring at me?" the human asked.

"I'm awake, thank you," Alina said. "Are you a male or female? Your face and voice are indeterminable."

"Doesn't matter," the human said. "Get up, robot-girl."

Alina freed her feet from their plugs and climbed out. What had once been the implant lab was now a snow cave illuminated by battery lanterns. Thick ice coated the equipment, machines, and computers. The roof had partially collapsed, which explained the snow and ice piled on Alina's chamber. A long knotted rope hung through a separate hole that had been cut in the ceiling.

"I'm Coren," the stranger said. He or she was about Alina's height, maybe a little overweight, no facial hair. Young, perhaps mid-twenties or so. It was impossible to discern breasts under the bulky gray parka.

"I'm Alina," Alina said. "Should I call you sir or madam?"

Coren began breaking the shovel down into smaller pieces that fit into a backpack. "You're really hung up on gender, aren't you?"

"I'm programmed to recognize two."

"Well, I'm not programmed to answer you," Coren said. "Call me by my name, or call me hey you, or just call me a person. I don't care."

Alina's databank lit up with information about gender-neutral pronouns. She had several options to choose from. Ze, En, Co, Thon. In her sixth pregnancy, the parents had both been professors of female sexuality at Brown University. They'd taught her feminist language and theory, matricentricty and gynocritics and—

The ice slid out from under Alina's feet. She fell flat on her rear and stayed there.

"Hey!" Coren abandoned the backpack. "Are you all right?"

"I am functioning well," Alina replied, flooded with memories of that pregnancy—Professor Ahmeti and Professor Sauter, their house in Providence, the two white cats who sat in the sunny windows all day, the way Professor Ahmeti made meatball and garlic soup every Friday night and Professor Sauter chewed through pencils when grading papers, their happy faces when their baby was ready, the way they'd kissed Alina's cheeks in thanks.

You're not equipped with long term memory, she'd been told. By Scott. Scott with his easy smile and his bangs in his eyes and his devotion to fixing her nipple tubes every time she came to the shop.

Coren said, "I know you're just a robot, but I've seen healthier looking corpses. You sick?"

Alina adjusted her cheeks to include more pink. She flushed red to her lips, and made her eyes appear brighter and more blue (very desirable).

For some reason, the adjustments made Coren frown. "Let's climb out of here. I've got a coat and clothes for you so you don't freeze."

"I am impervious to most extremes of weather, Person Coren. Also, my uterus operates independently on its own settings and is at optimal temperature."

"Yeah. About that. Are you carrying?"

"Carrying what?" Alina asked.

"A baby, dummy."

Alina answered, "Yes. I am carrying the fertilized egg of Mark Dubay and Dan Poole. It is four days old. Are Dan and Mark nearby?"

"They're dead," Coren said. "Let's get out of this ice hole before we freeze over, and you can see what the world did to itself."

\* \* \*

Winter had come and stayed. Although Alina's calendar told her it was June, the forest around *New Human, More Human* was nothing but frozen treetops buried by snow. She saw no birds or squirrels, no smoke from cities or factories, no signs that any humans lived nearby. Only snow, ice, and gray sky. She attempted to connect with the data center, but received no answer.

Alina said, "Mark and Dan were studying climate science. They postulated a scenario of long-term adverse meteorological change."

Coren had hunched down next to a sled packed with supplies. "Sounds like fancy words for the Big Freeze. Come here, put these clothes on. Hard to explain me dragging you around dressed like it's a heat wave."

Alina donned trousers, boots, gloves, and a gray parka. The clothes were frayed but clean. Coren handed her a pair of snowshoes that looked like oversized tennis rackets and asked, "You ever use these?"

"No sir or ma'am."

"You better learn fast." Coren strapped down everything on the sled, shouldered two straps to drag it, and said, "Let's go."

"I can pull that," Alina said. "I'm not susceptible to fatigue or strain."

"I'll do it," Coren said.

Once they had hiked all the way down the hill, Alina saw that Dr. Ogilvy's complex was indistinguishable under the wintry landscape. He'd be disappointed, she thought. He had worked very hard on her and her predecessors, Acantha and Adelphia and the other four whose names somehow escaped her—

If it was unexpected to have this reservoir of memories bubbling inside her, it was equally unexpected that the data was incomplete. She could picture Dan's kind face but not Mark's. Every detail of her room at the Crowthers' villa was crystal-clear, but the inside of Dr. Ogilvy's office was a gray box devoid of specifics. It was likely that she was internally damaged. But Scott had said she had no long-term memory capacity at all. Had he been wrong?

You're my favorite, he'd said. Time and time again, as he adjusted her breasts and held her tight.

They walked a mile in silence, then Alina asked, "My internal calendar says I've been in stasis for fifty years. Is that correct, Person Coren?"

Coren was leading the way, using snow poles to test for unsafe areas. "Just call me Coren."

"I'm programmed for formality. Person is an appropriate title. Person also comes with a gender-neutral pronoun: per. Per talks to oneself. Give it to per. Per went to the mall."

Coren grunted. "If it makes you happy, call me whatever. Can you be happy?"

"I'm programmed to mimic." Alina smiled widely. "I'm happy you rescued me."

"Stop that, it's creepy." Coren stopped, dropped the sled straps, and rubbed per shoulders. "Here's what I'd like. I'd like you to help me set up our tent. It's getting dark and we better bed down."

The tent was big enough for two people to lie down inside and to sit up if they didn't mind being a little hunched over. The light gray fabric blended in with the snow and provided a barrier against the bitter wind. Coren also had chemical heat-packs marked with faded letters, and thermal blankets to wrap oneself in, and a small camp stove that per set up outside.

"I know how to build a campfire," Alina offered as they hunched beside it.

"No wood," Coren said. "You need to eat, right? You can eat stew?"

"My unit requires no nutrition. My nutrient reservoir sustains the fetus and needs to be augmented by a regular intake of calories."

Coren blinked. "So that's a yes?"

“Yes, per. For optimal results at this stage of gestation, I should consume one thousand calories per day. If I were human, I would need much more.”

Coren retrieved two unlabeled tin cans from the sled. The tops had been crudely welded on. Per opened them up with a can opener and revealed meat stew. “I don’t know much about calories, but it took me longer than I thought to find you. My supplies aren’t what they should be. We might have to skimp a little or find more to get where we’re going.”

“Are you taking me to Mark and Dan? They’ll be worried about Con Leche.”

“Con what?”

“The child’s nickname. It means ‘with milk,’ as in coffee with milk.”

“I’ve never had coffee,” Coren said. “Besides, they’re dead, remember? Or, if they are alive, I don’t know where they are, or how to get you to them.”

Alina said, “1721 Peach Tree Lane, Cragford, Georgia.”

“We’re not going to Georgia, robot-girl.” Coren warmed per hands over the warming cans. “That’s not my mission.”

“Are you in the military, per?” Alina asked. “To my knowledge, the military does not accept soldiers of indeterminable gender.”

Coren looked cross. “It’s not indeterminable. It’s just indeterminable to you. At least I have a gender. You’re just an It.”

“I’m a She,” Alina said. “To humanize the experience.”

“Whatever you are, you’re still a robot.”

“I’m well versed in chromosome disorders that can blur gender boundaries,” Alina said. “I would alert on any fetus showing an XXX or XXY abnormality.”

“Call me abnormal and you can sleep out in the snow tonight,” Coren said.

“I don’t sleep, Person Coren.”

Coren nudged a can off the stove toward Alina and handed her a fork. “Close your eyes and fake it.”

“Wouldn’t it be better for me to keep an eye out for unfriendly people?”

“Are you programmed for self-defense?”

“I must protect the child in my womb.” Alina paused as new information popped up in her databank. “During my stasis, someone outfitted me with knowledge of twelve martial arts systems and other hand-to-hand combat maneuvers. I can also strip, repair, and fire pistols and automatic weapons. In addition, I can wire and disarm explosives—”

Coren coughed around some of per stew. “You need all those skills to guard a little baby?”

“I think the information was mistakenly uploaded during my stasis.”

“Or maybe someone saw the Big Freeze coming and thought you’d need it to survive.”

Alina finished her dinner. “If you are not taking me to Dan and Mark, you will need their access codes.”

“Their what?”

“To open my womb when Con Leche is ready. Only the parents have the authorization to access the child.”

“What if the parents forget it?”

“In the absence of a security code, I would need remote authorization from my owners.”

“Huh,” Coren said. “You mean, your dead owners? From that complex that’s buried under ice, everything broken and dead?”

“Yes, per.”

“So what happens if there’s no code and no authorization? How will the baby get out?”

“Dr. Ogilvy once said my womb was like a locked bank vault,” Alina said. “The only

way to open it under other circumstances will be to destroy my control center. But don't worry, per. The baby won't be ready for approximately thirty-five more weeks. I'm sure we will reach Mark and Dan by then."

After dinner was over, Coren said, "I'm going to go take a piss in the woods. You stay here, and don't peek."

Alina waited by the sled and contemplated stealing more food. She calculated that her food intake had been three hundred and eighty calories. Not optimal. Her decision tree told her to use her reservoir and not alienate the human, but the reservoir would deplete quickly as Con Leche grew.

When Coren returned per asked, "If someone tried to hurt the baby, could you kill them? Or do robots have some kind of rule about not killing humans?"

"Protection of the fetus is my priority."

"So that's yes on killing?"

"I have never had to make that decision," Alina said. "I believe I could."

Coren dug around in the sled and pulled out a sack of salted meat jerky for dessert. Per gave Alina some. One hundred twenty more calories. Coren asked, "What about deciding to flush it? Could you do that? You know, end it?"

"I am prohibited," Alina said instantly.

"I kind of thought you'd say that. Okay, look, I'm going to bed. You stay out here. Keep yourself amused. Wake me up if you see anyone, or any kind of animal we could eat."

Alina saw no people or animals during the night. Instead she sorted through the new information that had been stored inside her. The self-defense knowledge was only part of a larger database about survival skills that included hunting, cooking and eating wild animals (difficult in this new climate, where many species had gone extinct); building winter shelters of snow and branches (but all the branches were coated with ice); and administering first aid to herself and to any injured humans.

The next morning, after a breakfast of canned peas, more jerky, and salted fish, they set off again. As Coren led her through the frozen wilderness to their classified destination, Alina asked, "Are there many humans left alive?"

"A lot, but I don't know how many."

"How do they survive such arduous conditions?"

"It ain't easy."

"Yet you endured hardship, risked danger, and used precious supplies to find and retrieve me. Did Mark and Dan hire you?"

"You remember what I told you about them?"

Alina sorted through her memories. "1721 Peach Tree Lane, Cragford, Georgia."

"Oh, boy," Coren said. "I think you've got a screw loose."

They spent the next few days trekking along old roads and highways. The stumps of old billboards protruded from the snow pack, along with the roofs of rest stops or fast food restaurants. Alina debated the possibility of burrowing through the snow to find frozen food supplies, but Coren's digging equipment was limited. Occasionally Alina could see the frozen contours of cars beneath her feet in places where the wind had worn away the snow. Frozen drivers and passengers could be defrosted and cooked to provide nutrition for Con Leche, but she didn't think Coren would agree to the idea.

Each night Coren slept in the tent, swaddled in blankets while Alina kept watch. Alina didn't think per sleep was very restful. She could hear per tossing and turning in the cold.

"With greater caloric intake, I could keep you warm," Alina commented on the fifth morning. "I can generate external heat."

"If you got more to eat, you mean," Coren said, per breath frosting as per tugged the sled over a frozen obstacle.

“Yes.”

“I can’t make more food appear out of thin air, and I’m giving you as much as I can. What we’ve got has to last until we get to where we’re going.”

Alina continued, “I’m also programmed for sexual activities. Those can raise your body temperature, if you please.”

Coren stopped walking. “What did you just say?”

“During my stasis, someone uploaded operational knowledge of several sexual activities. I don’t have most of the equipment, but I have two hands, a mouth, a waste port—”

“Okay, stop!” Coren snapped, per face turning red. “I’m not going to start using you like some sex toy. That’s disgusting.”

Alina tilted her head to mimic curiosity. “Humans have long used mechanical devices for sexual gratification, haven’t they? The technician Scott used me for sexual pleasure approximately nine times, according to my databank. Mr. Crowther kissed me. Mrs. Labonte would shower with me and bring herself to—”

“Stop talking!” Coren said. “People shouldn’t be doing things with a pregnant robot.”

“But it made them happy. Isn’t happiness a priority?”

“No. Not with everything. It doesn’t mean people have the right to just do anything they want to you.”

“Humans often used machines to make them happy,” Alina said. “Do you find me unattractive? I was told that I was beautiful.”

Coren’s cheeks flushed even deeper. “Yes, you’re pretty. It’s not that.”

A shout from somewhere down the road interrupted their conversation. Two figures in bulky gray parkas were coming their way. As they drew nearer, Alina saw that they were both six feet tall, wore cross-country skis, and had rifles slung on their backs.

One raised his hand. “Hey there!”

Coren said, “Let me handle them,” and put on a blank expression. Alina mimicked it.

The strangers stopped several feet away. They were both bearded men, Caucasian, perhaps in their mid-thirties. Larger than Coren. Stronger, too. Their clothes were dirty, but in the past someone had patched the elbows of their coats. They smelled like people who had not had the luxury of a bath or shower in a long time. Coren smelled the same way.

“I’m Gordon and this is Lewis,” said the one who had hailed them. He was slightly shorter than his friend, with darker hair, not smiling, but friendly enough. “You ladies passing through?”

Alina wondered what they saw in Coren to address her as female. Lewis remained silent, but his gaze swept from Alina’s face to her boots and back up again in a way that remind her of Scott the technician.

“Passing through to meet up with some family,” Coren said, per gaze frank and voice flat. “How’s the road?”

Gordon replied, “Passable. But the barometer back in town’s dropping. Won’t be safe to be sleeping outdoors tonight, not with a storm on the way.”

“We’re prepared for rough weather,” Coren said.

“Sure you are. But we’ve got twenty men, thirty women, bunch of kids, some extra space to bed down,” Gordon replied. “Bunch of folk trying to get by. Trust me, no one’s after your virtue.”

“I’m sure that’s true,” Coren said. “Thanks, anyway.”

Lewis was still eyeing Alina. She considered the possibility that the town had food supplies that would benefit Con Leche, or that they might have communication equipment that would reach Dan and Mark. She knew that evaluating honesty was a gap in her programming; how humans judged deceit was a mystery to her.

“Is your town far?” Alina asked.

Coren's shoulders tensed. Gordon turned his gaze toward Alina, eyebrows lifting a little. "About a mile. We don't have much, but we share."

"Share or barter?" Alina asked. "Give freely, or take something in return?"

"Doesn't matter," Coren said firmly. "We're fine on our own."

"Not unless you plan to turn into a popsicle," Lewis said, his voice rougher than the other man's. He stopped looking at Alina and instead stomped his boots in the snow. "Last storm killed a man and his woman heading south. We found their bodies in their tent, frozen together."

Coren shook per head. "We've got supplies. Thanks again for the offer."

Per tugged the sled back into motion and started off. Gordon caught Alina's arm and said, frowning, "Don't be foolish. You'll die out here, just because your friend is stubborn."

He seemed sincere, but his presumptions were wrong.

"I won't die," she said. "Please release my arm."

"Idiot women," he muttered, and let her go.

As she walked after Coren she listened for any sounds that the men were following. That was a lesson that Professor Sauter had impressed upon her. As the physically weaker sex, women had to always be prepared that a stranger could be a threat, and that even familiar men could suddenly turn violent. But no footsteps followed them, no hands grabbed out. When she glanced over her shoulder, she saw that Gordon and Lewis had continued up the road.

"Why didn't you trust them?" Alina said when she caught up to Coren.

Coren snorted. "Never trust anyone. Their 'town' might turn out to be nothing more than a shack, and we'd be dead or worse by sundown. They might keep you around, all pretty and indestructible, but me? Slit my throat, if I'm lucky."

By early afternoon, however, it was clear that the men had not lied about the weather. The temperature dropped fast as the promised storm rolled in. Coren stopped their hike early. They had just finished setting up the tent when the first fat flakes of snow started spitting down. Dinner was hurried, more tinned meat and hard biscuits, and when Coren crawled into the tent per said, "You better get in here with me. Don't want the wind blowing you away."

Once inside, the only practical thing to do was for Alina to crawl into a nest of blankets with per. They both kept their coats and boots on, and Coren used a thermal blanket to make a protective peak over their faces. It was still daylight, though the light had dimmed with the steadily increasing snow. The temperature dropped rapidly, like invisible ice water flooding over them. Alina felt Coren shiver.

"Are you okay?" Coren asked.

"My womb is keeping Con Leche comfortably warm. How are you?"

Coren's gaze went beyond Alina's shoulder to the wall of the tent. "You could have gone with those men. I couldn't have stopped you. Maybe they did mean well, maybe you could have more food for the baby."

"I know. But you are taking me to Dan and Mark, and that is an important priority."

"I'm not—" Coren didn't finish the sentence. Per shivered again. "It's like ice in here."

Alina studied per thin eyebrows and pointed chin. In all the days they'd been hiking, Coren had not needed to shave per chin or lip line. Alina said, "They inferred you were female. You didn't correct them."

"Doesn't matter what I am," Coren said.

Clumps of snow began to weigh down the roof of the tent. Alina took it upon herself to periodically thump it free. She was careful to not nudge the blankets and let the below-freezing air into Coren's cocoon. The wind started howling, a long ceaseless wail, and Coren broke open one of their remaining chemical packs. The heat didn't last long. As full darkness came on, Alina calculated the outside temperature and Coren's chances of survival given the resources they had. The odds were not in per favor.

"You should know where we're going," Coren said, just when Alina thought per had fallen asleep. "In case we get separated or something."

"Separated how?" Alina asked.

Coren ignored the question. "Follow the old I-80 into Pennsylvania to Scranton. From there, south to Schuylkill. My community's there, living underground in an old coal mine. We still mine the coal, trade it for food down south where they still get some summer. The boss there, he's the one I got you for. He talked about you, how he always wanted to meet you, but he figured you were dead in the Freeze and never would ask anyone to go north for you. I wanted to prove I could do it. That I could get you for him."

Alina didn't like how Coren's words were slurring. Slurring was a sign of hypothermia, and the bitter, bitter air wasn't going to get warmer anytime soon. She contemplated several decision trees. More than one path led her to prioritize Coren's survival. She said, "I believe I should consume some food and generate heat for you."

"Ain't you curious?" Coren asked, per eyes closed. "Who wanted to meet you?"

"When you're warmer, I will be curious."

She crawled out from under the blankets to the supplies they'd dragged inside, switched on the lantern, and started eating the hard biscuits, salted jerky, cold stew, uncooked rice, and canned meat and vegetables. She ate as fast as her throat could pass the food. Two thousand and seven hundred calories total. Her womb stayed steady at ninety-eight degrees Fahrenheit as she began to raise her shell temperature. Back in the blanket nest, she put her hand flat against Coren's face. Coren moaned a little but didn't wake fully. Alina took off her coat and blouse and put them on the pile of blankets.

"I have to remove your clothes now," Alina announced.

Working carefully, she got Coren nearly naked and sidled close to per. Coren moved instinctively toward the warmth of Alina's skin. Alina could feel all the details of per's curves and weight. Coren's breasts, soft and round, pressed against Alina's chest. Coren's penis, also soft, lay between them without a twitch. Alina didn't doze off but she did channel more energy into heat than cognition, and was startled some time later when Coren said, "What the hell?" and pushed her away.

It was still dark out, the wind shrieking and flapping the sides of the tent. Coren sat upright and fumbled with the lantern. The flash of light made per wince, and the icy air had per quickly wrapping herself in the blankets.

"Are you feeling better?" Alina asked.

"What are you doing? Molesting me in my sleep?" Coren demanded.

"You were hypothermic. I am generating heat for you."

"You're generating . . ." Coren looked bewildered. Then per saw the discarded debris of Alina's dinner. "You ate everything?"

"You needed heat," Alina said.

"You stupid . . ." Coren rubbed the side of per head. "Damn it, it's too cold to argue with you."

Per abruptly crawled back down into the blankets and pressed against Alina, seeking out every inch of warmth. Miserably per said, "You're too good to pass up. I haven't been this warm in months."

"There is no shame in needing heat," Alina replied, her chin atop Coren's head. "I'm only a machine."

"But it's gross," Coren muttered. "You could have at least kept your shirt on. Or my shirt on. What'd you have to take everything off for?"

"More effective heat transfer. Are you anxious because I am now aware of your physiology? You obviously have an XXY or XXYY chromosome arrangement."

Coren sighed. "I don't care what you think of my chromosomes. It's gross because you're topless and those are your naked breasts I'm up against and my full name is Coren Crowther and you're my damned grandmother, how's that?"

\* \* \*

"I'm not your grandmother," Alina said the next morning, as they packed up the tent under the clear blue sky. A thin layer of ice covered everything, but the storm was well past. "I'm a toaster oven who happened to carry your father's fetus to full term."

Coren was back in per own clothes, disgruntled because there was no food left for breakfast. "You keep saying that. But my dad, he's the one who calls you his robot mom. He told us about you for the first time last year, on his birthday. Who would have guessed it?"

"He runs the community you live in," Alina surmised. "In the coal mine."

"The Crowthers made their money in coal," Coren replied. Per tied down the last strap on the sled. "If the weather's okay, we should be there in about five or six days. Is the baby going to be okay if you don't get any food? You ate everything we had."

Alina had already calculated her nutrient levels. "It is not optimal, but I can sustain Con Leche, yes."

"I might not be in such good shape. You might be dragging me on this sled by the time we get there. But it'll be worth it just to see my dad's face."

"Is his gratitude important to you?"

"It's not about gratitude." Coren took up the sled straps. "I've got three older brothers. Big macho men. Everyone looks up to them, all the girls want to—well, you know. Me? Not so much. No one expects me to be as strong or fast or smart. So this way, I could prove myself. I could do something no one else did."

Alina nodded. "I don't have wishes, but if I did, I would wish to see your father. To help you prove your worth, regardless of the size of your testicles or breasts."

Coren winced. "We don't have to talk about that, okay?" Then per face clouded up. "What do you mean, you would wish it?"

"1721 Peach Tree Lane," Alina said. "I must find Con Leche's parents."

"But you—" Coren started. "You can't make it to Georgia on your own. That's weeks away in this terrain and weather. The baby won't last."

"I will find food," Alina told per. "I can trade or barter, I can perform sexual acts with strangers, I can dig up frozen corpses—"

Coren held up both hands. "Stop talking!"

Alina went silent. Coren took a deep breath and said, "The mine is a sure thing. We've got food and we can figure out a way to get your womb open; we've got some men who used to know a lot about computers—"

"Good luck to you, Coren, and thank you for rescuing me." Alina started walking across the snow.

Coren caught up to her and snagged her sleeve. "No, wait! I'm serious. You can't just wander around looking for two men who probably died a long time ago."

"I'm aware there is risk," Alina said. "But I can't change my programming. I must seek the parents and deliver their child."

She resumed walking. The fresh snow was thick and wet, hard on her snowshoes. The icy air made the slightest sound carry clear and wide. She was one tenth of a mile along the road before she heard Coren come after her with the sled. Alina stopped and waited.

"No digging up corpses," Coren said firmly. "No more naked in the middle of the night. If I say run, you say how far. And after the baby's done, you come back to the mine with me. Agree to all that, and I'll go with you. Stupidest thing I've ever done, but I'll go with you."

Alina smiled. "Thank you. Together we can make Dan and Mark very happy."

"We'll see about that," Coren said, not sounding entirely hopeful, and together they trudged toward the blinding white horizon. O Copyright © 2012 Sandra McDonald

**Gray Rinehart enjoyed a rather odd US Air Force career in which he fought rocket propellant fires, refurbished space launch facilities, "flew" Milstar satellites, drove trucks, processed nuclear command and control orders, and commanded the Air Force's largest satellite tracking station. Today, he is a contributing editor for Baen Books and a writer/editor for the Industrial Extension Service at North Carolina State University. His fiction has appeared in *Analog*, *Redstone Science Fiction*, and *Tales of the Talisman*. Gray's alter ego is the "Gray Man," one of several famed ghosts of South Carolina's Grand Strand; his web site is [www.graymanwrites.com](http://www.graymanwrites.com). In his first story for *Asimov's*, the author imagines a very different military experience in his exciting tale of a . . .**

# SENSITIVE, COMPARTMENTED

**Gray Rinehart**

**S**ix months after the implant operation, Holly only felt at home inside a Faraday cage.

Doctor Campos said the vertigo and disorientation would abate, that Holly just needed to learn to compartmentalize her thoughts and ignore the thoughts of those around her. She knew he was lying to cover his ignorance: everyone who had been implanted reacted a little differently, and some never learned to cope. Holly willed herself to overcome, partly out of duty but mostly out of pride.

Gavin said he understood, but he couldn't relate; nevertheless, he lined their living room and their bedroom with cut layers of fine wire mesh, folded, overlaid, and conductively bonded in the precise pattern she needed to feel isolated and safe. She loved him for it. He planned to do the bathroom next.

She wondered sometimes what Civil Engineering would say if she got transferred and they came to inspect the house and found the walls, windows, doors, ceilings, and floors covered with metal—their government property turned into a big tinfoil hat. She couldn't very well explain it to them, since they weren't briefed into the program.

Gavin did all the cooking now, too, since he hadn't done the kitchen yet. They didn't go out anymore.

She felt the creeping touches of the whole neighborhood every time she stepped out of the house: so many impressions that she couldn't differentiate and couldn't compensate. With Gavin alone or with any single person she knew well, she could

block the images, sensations, and emotions; with a stranger or a few different people in close proximity, it was harder; with more people, out to the edge of her sensitivity at about a quarter mile, impossible. She felt their minds like things alive, crawling inside her and digesting her *self* the way cheese maggots digest and ferment *casu marzu*; the other minds left her with a residue of mixed emotion that sometimes took hours to dissipate.

But she had her oath, and the mission, and her receptivity was the whole reason she was useful to the program. The augmentations let her jack into the SR-129's neural net and sensor array; that they also boosted her range so much that being unshielded wore her nerves down to the bare ends and sent them flipping about and sparking like downed power lines seemed a fair price to pay. When she was jacked into the aircraft at hypersonic speed she could feel precisely people miles away, but even then the impressions were vague enough to annoy her: they came to her in voices she felt and feelings she heard and memories like photographs she couldn't quite remember but couldn't erase, and often left her with a sense of vertigo mixed with *déjà vu* and topped with ennui.

She left the house at two in the morning, when the dreaming residents of base housing were easier to ignore and the route to the flightline was nearly empty. Even so, by the time she got safely inside and behind the green doors, she was ready to retch. In the Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility she could collect herself, purge the uncomfortable tendrils of thought, and prepare for the day's mission.

In the SCIF, in the shielded cages, she was protected; in the air she had control and nearly the omniscience of God. Everywhere else she was vulnerable, and more so every day.

Holly had been in the vault an hour, resting crossways on a 1960s-vintage naukahyde loveseat. The sensation that clung to her soul, like duct tape wrapped around her lungs, had thinned enough that she was comfortable again. When the inner door opened, Holly didn't look up; she didn't have to. Staff Sergeant Malloy's serious sense of focus filled the room.

"You okay, Captain Bergman?" She closed the inner door behind her.

Holly smiled at the concern in Malloy's voice. They had worked together since before Holly's alteration, so it was almost as easy to block the Sergeant's internal monologue and emotional content as it was to block Gavin's. "I will be, Cathy."

"The implants still irritating you?"

Holly resisted the urge to scratch her forearms, where two of the arrays had been inserted. "No, they feel fine. It's everyone around me that feels . . . wrong. Too intense."

"What does Doc Campos say?"

"He's more concerned with the synesthesia—what color the anger is, what sound the horror makes. As for the rest, he says I'll get used to it."

"He would."

Holly looked up at the rancor in the NCO's voice. Cathy's beauty-queen face was tense with suppressed rage. She was a statuesque blonde in Battle Dress Utilities who made Holly feel short and fat by comparison, a brilliant technician who had joined the COBRA MIRROR program from the National Security Agency. She also waged an intense internal battle against anorexia, and forced herself to eat and work out religiously; she thought winning that daily battle made her strong. She might be right, but Holly wondered if it would eventually break her.

"It's okay, Cathy. Gavin's helping me find ways to cope."

Cathy looked down at her; the NCO's jaw muscle twitched. Holly squirmed a little and the loveseat squeaked.

"You're not telling them the whole story, are you?"

Holly looked away, up at the "Only You Can Prevent Foreign Object Damage"

poster on the wall. “Just that I’m too sensitive for my own good, and that it’s better when I’m in a shielded room. If I tell them any more, they’ll DNIF me.”

Cathy scowled. “There are worse things than being DNIFed.”

Holly couldn’t explain it in terms Cathy would understand. Before she got on flight status, when she was just a linguist and analyst, she didn’t think “Duties Not Including Flying” would be a big deal. But now that she had real missions to fly, critical intel to gather, and the power and freedom of floating and flying—she couldn’t blithely give it up.

“Maybe so,” Holly said, “but Captain Rembert’s not ready. He can’t tell imagination from memory from nightmare yet, let alone register conscious thought. He may never get past the ‘everything’s a hallucination’ stage. And since Vivian Kellerman rejected the implants, she’ll never be an asset. So that leaves me.” Holly dropped her barrier slightly—it was like opening a Tupperware container, just a fraction, to see if what was inside had spoiled—and felt Cathy’s concern mixed with a healthy dose of angry skepticism.

*Can’t blame her, really.*

Holly changed the subject. “So do we have a mission yet?” she asked.

Cathy paused, relaxed, and returned to full professional NCO mode. “No, ma’am, but we will by 0830. Colonel Abbott got called to the Command Post about an hour ago, and left Major Levering to do the planning. Major Palikowski will be flying—he’ll be here for the mission brief.”

Holly nodded; “P10” had been one of the original F-129 test pilots, before the Intel side adapted the airframe for this special use. “What’s the target?”

“Several, in succession, primarily Eastern Europe. Over the Pole and in over Norway and Sweden, down across Riga, Minsk, and Kiev, then across the Black Sea and the Persian Gulf and out over the Indian Ocean, over the South Pole and home.”

“Not feeling for anything over the Mideast?”

“You can pick up what you want, but it’s not the priority. But they’ll go over all that in the briefing.”

Holly never asked Cathy how she knew so much about the mission parameters before anyone else. The NCO was never wrong; her connections were excellent. Cathy already had a line number for another stripe, and if she stuck around she’d make Chief in record time. And Holly should know: her father was a retired Chief who spent most of his intelligence career in DIA.

*No wonder I feel safest when I’m in a SCIF,* Holly thought.

Holly’s shielded pressure suit fit like her own skin. Better, maybe, since she conductively bonded the arrays in her arms, legs, and sides to the suit itself. Her helmet and oxygen mask were adapted from standard life support equipment, but formed a complete, shielded, self-enclosed system that channeled all of her sensitivity through the aircraft’s sensors.

She was prone, in the belly compartment that was a weapons bay in the F-129 fighter variant, face-down and floating against warm shock-absorbing material as if she were in a sensory deprivation chamber. She could move some, but not much, and in full mission mode kept her arms outstretched like Christ on a flying crucifix. The vehicle’s systems sped her perception so she could collect and characterize gigabytes of data, but they also made the mission seem longer than it really was. So before and after her collections, she relaxed as much as she could and fine-tuned her perceptions.

The carrier aircraft took them up in large, lazy spirals as P10 checked the systems and counted down their progress to the launch point. Holly chuckled at his joyful yelp over the intercom as the carrier dropped them and the SR-129’s modified engines kicked them up to the stratosphere. She barely felt a nudge.

She left the Canadians alone as the plane headed north. Once they were over the Pole and headed south again, she reached out and touched the U.S. Embassies and the military attachés she used as calibration targets. She didn't think they knew they were targeted; they had the clearances, but not the need-to-know about COBRA MIRROR. They had enough to worry about, not the least of which was that they had so much less useful intelligence than they used to.

Governments good and bad had become adept at hiding their signals as commercial encryption got better, and even hiding their signatures, so Washington had turned to more exotic means with varying degrees of success. COBRA MIRROR was a revival of the old MK ULTRA experiments, with electronic enhancements instead of psychotropic drugs. Holly's alacrity with languages had been the key to her selection, something about the part of the brain that processed language—

"In the profile, all clear ahead," P10 said. The computer kept his voice from taking on the deep drone of a slowed-down recording, but the pace of his words was languorous, moving in a slow trickle like a runnel of nearly crystallized honey. "Listen and learn mode. Your stick. Shutting up, now."

Holly smiled as if he had winked at her through the intercom, and then she went to work.

Snug inside her aerogel-filled capsule in the belly of the speeding aircraft, her perception reached out with more precision and power than a Class IV laser. If the systems weren't feeding her data, she would be like a sponge soaking up everything around her; when she was hooked into the sensor grid, she was like a pipette.

Holly had collected the woman in Riga on three previous missions, and had her characterized as thoroughly as the ELINT guys could read the operating modes of a TOMB STONE radar. A diplomat on official records, the woman's other activities included worldwide smuggling of everything from weapons to slaves, the proceeds of which fed into a dozen different terror organizations. Holly extracted what she could and stored it for replay, noting only that a shipment of Russian anti-tank weapons was on the dock waiting for transport to the new government in what used to be Belize.

Holly missed the first target in Minsk—the ops order stated that the primary might not be in the area—and barely had time to lock onto the secondary target. The GRU Colonel was having a late breakfast after a night with his mistress, and had received within the last three days the schematics of—

A tone in her left ear drew Holly's attention up from the target and out to a dark spot, like a sinkhole on the horizon of her perception. It was unusual, so the autonomous part of the sensors had tagged it—being unusual meant it was probably dangerous, and as they approached Kiev, screaming across the sky like a meteor, she discarded the Kiev target in favor of investigating this new thing.

She nudged the plane a little starboard, to the edge of the envelope. With the distance of the mission profile, fractions of a degree mattered in terms of being able to make it home; more important than that, at their current speed anything other than minute changes risked putting the aircraft into an unrecoverable condition.

She probed the darkness, but couldn't penetrate it. She'd never seen anything like it, but this wasn't sight: the spot smelled like lighter fluid her dad used to use in the grill, and felt like the soft fur on a cat's belly. Its edges were indistinct but its contrast against the rest of the world was stark, like a drop of India ink floating in a glass of milk.

They sped nearer, set to pass somewhat to the west of it. Above it, miles up, one of the Russians' near-space airships floated, bigger than a pod of blue whales.

*I didn't know they'd moved one of those over here,* Holly thought.

Heat washed over her side: feedback from the sensors that the airship was hitting the SR-129 with high-powered lasers to burn away optics or blind the pilot.

Holly withdrew her perception and gave the controls back to P10.

Three surface-to-air missiles launched toward them. Holly didn't flinch; they'd been through this before: the SR-129 would almost be over the horizon before the SAMs got to the point in the sky where they had been. An instant later, though, a fusillade of air-to-air missiles launched from the near-space ship, aimed along their flight path at a variety of altitudes. P10 made small, precise corrections as the missiles began disgorging huge amounts of chaff that shone like aluminum snowflakes.

Only a few of the pieces impacted the modified F-129. They were enough.

One in particular tore through the aircraft's skin, into the sensor capsule, through the aerogel, and through Holly's right hand.

Her shielding compromised, P10's pain blasted Holly more fiercely than her own. It seeped into her as her perceptive speed slowed and the systems around her cut out—as fast as the twitch of an encephalograph needle, her pilot's agony ripped through her. His breath came ragged in her ears; she concentrated on it to take her mind off sudden vertigo.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Better than you, I think." She had pulled her right hand in close to her body, pressing it tight. She didn't have enough room to do much more than that.

P10 was fighting to maintain control as they lost speed and altitude. "I look like someone went over me with a cheese grater," he said, "but I think only one piece did any real damage."

"Where?"

"Right side, chest. Pressure suit clamped down okay . . . but it hurts like a mother."

Alarms and status signals blared all around her—all around them. Holly asked, "That's not our only problem, is it?"

"No. We lost a lot of aero . . . dynamic efficiency . . . I don't know how much . . . structural damage. Lots of friction heating . . . bleeding off speed . . . trying for eject altitude. Squawking Mayday. With luck . . . we'll end up in the Indian Ocean."

"How far from REEF?" The satellite tracking station on Diego Garcia would have been in contact with one of the spacecraft taking their mission data and telemetry, but would they know what had happened? The data were all ones and zeros to them.

"Long ways from Diego," P10 said. "Be lucky to ditch us . . . before we have to land on . . . ice in Antarctica."

"Guess I'll get to test the capsule," Holly said. She wondered if her mission module would float as advertised, since it had at least one hole in it.

"Better you than me," Major Palikowski said.

The gas generator fired and spat Holly's capsule out of the struggling aircraft. P10 punched out seconds later; she felt his shock as he ejected, a sudden tightness in her right side as if a horse had kicked her. The few working sensor feeds in her capsule showed her a view from one of the SR-129's remaining cameras as the plane twisted through the sky and tore itself apart. She didn't see P10's parachute, and as her canvas caught the air currents she lost contact with him.

She braced herself for a serious jolt when the capsule hit the water; the aerogel cushion around her was miraculous, but not *that* miraculous. The impact felt worse than the night her first boyfriend wrecked his car trying to take a sharp curve. Her teeth hurt, and she was sure a couple were cracked, but at least she'd been careful not to bite off her tongue. Everything about the capsule worked as advertised, courtesy of the black program budget that bought only the best for covert operations: it splashed, righted itself with its own flotation equipment, deployed the raft, activated the GPS-enhanced beacon, and opened up to release her from captivity.

She nearly fainted when she reached out to pull herself onto the raft. She wasn't

sure how much of the pain from her shattered hand was really in her nerves, and how much was in her imagination: her last two fingers and a large chunk of her right forearm were missing. The bright blue aerogel turned purple with her clotting blood. The sight drew her attention again and again as she struggled, left-handed, to transfer herself to the unsteady raft.

Then she let herself faint.

Holly floated, more alone than alone, a thousand miles from anywhere. She had used most of the contents of the survival first aid kit to wrap her hand and forearm. She'd only thrown up once, when she touched some of the wires in the array in her arm. At least she hadn't thrown up in the raft.

Once she was secure in the raft with the survival supplies, she sank the capsule.

She kept her pressure suit on over her flight suit, to keep in as much warmth as possible. It was useless as shielding now, and she had no one to shield against.

The first hour or so, as the sun edged behind the ocean, she felt light, unburdened, downright giggly with freedom. As the twilight darkened into night and the cold settled on her, and as the unfamiliar southern stars blazed in the perfect night, loneliness began to crush her. She had only her own mind for company, only her own thoughts for entertainment, and she found herself wanting. Without Gavin's quick mind touching hers, without Cathy's purposeful thoughts or the flood-tide of emotional highs and lows of base housing, she was empty, insignificant.

Her body shook, less from the chill than from minor delirium tremens. She was withdrawing from a drug to which she hadn't known she was addicted.

*And I wasn't even used to it yet.*

She tried singing, but lyrics and tunes didn't match in her mind. She tried poetry, and prayer, but her mind drifted like the raft she rode.

*Is this what Nick went through?*

Major Nick Curry had been Holly's predecessor in the program. Two especially high-level discoveries had earned him a classified Silver Star and an early promotion. Once Holly was flying, and when Bob Rembert was in the pipeline, Nick had been reassigned and had his implants removed. She'd kept in touch with him for a while, on the secure Internet version of Twitter, but he hadn't posted an update in almost two months—

A mind touched Holly's, and the sensation was so nearly orgasmic that she gasped and lost her last conscious thought. She had been so utterly alone that she was almost convinced her implants wouldn't work anymore. Now that she knew they did, she drank in the emotion, the searching—no, the *yearning* to find her—and felt the other mind smile. She answered with a wide, welcoming grin of her own.

Then she realized that searching mind thought in Russian.

The night brought nightmares, and Holly wasn't even asleep.

Two huge helicopters flew over her and began orbiting her position. A destroyer approached behind them, clearly racing against her own people. The pressure of the flight and deck crews—tense, frightened, driven—beat against Holly's mind. She put on her helmet and tried pulling together the torn pieces of her suit, but she couldn't pull the fabric shreds over the bandages wrapped around her hand. The helmet nearly suffocated her without the SR-129's systems to supply conditioned air. She kept it on anyway, with the air valve open, taking whatever protection she could get.

By the time one of the destroyer's boats grappled onto her raft, Holly lay in fetal position, her arms pressed tight against her helmet, beset by a migraine as intense as a supernova. Rough hands grabbed her arms and legs, and strong arms pulled her out of the raft. They passed her up and over the gunwale and dumped her in the

boat. The motor roared, and a few moments later the tender was winched aboard the destroyer.

They put her on the deck, expecting her to stand, but she collapsed onto the night-cool surface. One of the sailors kicked her and cracked the faceplate away from the frame of her helmet. He was immediately reprimanded, but she barely registered it.

Her mind flooded, as if with boiling water. The rest of the sailors assaulted her without touching her. Their thoughts and feelings hit her like buckshot: the navigator whose alcoholic wife suspected the truth about his affair . . . the men hiding liaisons in the dark belowdecks . . . the conscript radioman responding automatically to the Captain's instructions . . . the sonar operator who planned to jump overboard because his girlfriend confessed her love for another man . . . the serial-rapist mechanic who could not or would not stop thinking of the many ways he wanted to abuse her. She tasted bile, and felt burning in the back of her throat, but she bit down against it; her broken teeth ground against each other as she fought from fouling her helmet.

They carried her into the superstructure and down below deck as one of the helicopters circled into the wind to land on the destroyer's helipad.

The metal structure afforded her some shielding against all but the closest and most intense minds. Minor relief blossomed inside her, and she clung to it.

They dumped her through a hatch. She jammed her injured hand against a crate and almost fainted. She lay there for what seemed a long time.

“Do you need help removing your helmet?”

This was the ship's doctor. He closed the hatch, and Holly was able to focus more on him. He was older, a chain smoker, and ran a small black-market trade in drugs from the sickbay stores. His fourteen-year-old son had been killed in a food riot in Samara the previous winter.

Impressions from the other officers and men continued to seep into the room—the cabin, she reminded herself—but they gradually diminished. Holly found it possible, after what seemed like a long time, to block all but the strongest of the doctor's emanations. She took off her helmet.

The doctor sanded clean a bolt head and twisted a heavy copper wire onto it. He sanded off a spot on the hatch itself, next to one of the hinges, and attached the other end of the wire to it.

“I hope this will make you more comfortable,” he said, and moved on to where a ventilation duct passed through the wall. “Once you are relaxed, perhaps you will let me treat your injury.”

He was conductively bonding the room's surfaces—bypassing the gaskets and other insulators. Did he know who and what she was?

“My name is—”

“Holly Bergman,” he interrupted. Holly opened her perception a fraction and felt the doctor's smug assurance. “Captain, United States Air Force. Born Holly June Lawrimore in Sumter, South Carolina, in June—of course—2002. You'll forgive me if I don't recall the exact date. I did not memorize your dossier.”

“Entered the Air Force Academy, left after your freshman year. Enrolled in Air Force training at the University of South Carolina, graduated in 2025. Commissioned a sec—”

“Right, okay,” Holly said. She twisted around until she was seated with her back to the bulkhead opposite the hatch. “And you are?”

The doctor smiled, but not a friendly smile. “I'm certain you can, if you wish, know more about me than I know about you.”

Holly felt diminished, as if she were collapsing in on herself like a black hole. How much did they know?

The doctor turned back to his immediate task. "You will be made comfortable, Captain Bergman," he said. "You will have a very special visitor in a few hours. I believe he is on the fourth helicopter."

Holly probed the doctor just enough to learn that above deck the Russians were shuttling around several helicopters from a squadron of a dozen vessels that had lain in wait specifically to recover what they could of the SR-129 and its crew. They knew they were in a race against U.S. search and rescue teams, who had two initial advantages: one, her beacon had transmitted her exact location, and two, the Australians were closer than almost anyone. Closer, that is, than any who had not already been deployed in the area.

The Russians knew that U.S. overhead assets were logging their movements and communications. They hoped to convince Holly's countrymen that they had arrived too late to rescue her, but they didn't expect that to work. So they hoped to confuse efforts to track her by playing a helicopter shell game, making it possible that any of a half-dozen ships could have her on board. And after they parleyed with the U.S. agents aboard the Australian ships headed their way, they would depart—each ship on a different heading, some to rendezvous with other ships and make the shell game even more complicated.

Holly sighed, perhaps a little overdramatically, relieved at what she did not find in the doctor's knowledge. Let him think she had resigned herself to this fate, so long as he didn't know about the tiny backup transmitter in her helmet.

Holly's hand was clean and stitched together, not neatly but adequately.

The local anesthetic had numbed her whole arm, and even made her jaw a little tingly on the right side, but now the sensation was returning. It crept down her arm like a circlet of snails leaving a slimy trail of pain. She had maybe a half hour before full sensation returned to her hand.

They had brought her some food—dolmades—on a thin plastic plate, and a bottle of water. She had eaten two of the stuffed grape leaves, surprised at how fresh they were, and then laboriously pulled her way out of the shielded pressure suit. She scratched at her stitches and considered eating another dolma when the hatch opened and a new person stepped through.

Holly squinted, as if the flood of emanations were a bright light. The newcomer laughed and thrust cold fingers of questions into her brain.

Holly answered with her name and rank, spitting the thoughts out as if they were bitter seeds. She blocked the worst of the attack—not enough to allow her to probe the man's intense mind, but enough that he resorted to speaking aloud.

"Hello, Captain Bergman. I looked forward to meeting you."

Holly gasped, still struck by the intensity of his probe. "Have you been waiting long?" she asked.

He sat down on a shipping container and looked around the cabin. He shivered. "No," he said.

"How do you know my name?"

"Hmm? We know all your names."

"Well, if you know my name, I should know yours."

He moved his head oddly, a side-to-side nod like the parrot her mom had bought when Holly was twelve. "Terek Kalinov," he said. "Lieutenant."

He looked barely twenty, far too young to be an officer. "So what happens next, Lieutenant Kalinov?"

He shrugged. "We take you home."

The Lieutenant's manner, and his answers, bothered Holly. She opened the tiniest crack in her perceptive wall. The intensity she had felt earlier was still there, but

now she perceived a roiling mass of emotion barely kept in check. It was confusion, like an ant farm that had been shaken, the inhabitants allowed to rebuild, and shaken again.

“To my home?” Holly asked.

The Lieutenant cocked his head as if listening to something. “No,” he said, “to my home.” He picked at his teeth with his right index finger; with his left hand, he scratched the inside of his right wrist.

The sensation had returned almost to Holly’s wrist; she let the pain focus her thoughts. This young man was her counterpart, her opposite number. Or was he?

“You have implants?” Holly asked.

“Of course,” he said.

He pulled up one sleeve of his uniform to show her the scars, stark white beneath the dark hairs on his arm. Holly looked closer, and what she took to be hair resolved into a mesh of fine wires. His own shielded cage, implanted? Or embedded sensors?

“How long have you had your implants?” she asked.

He pantomimed counting on his fingers. “Seven years.”

The dolmades in her stomach suddenly felt heavy and sour. The poor bastard got implanted when he was thirteen or fourteen?

Kalinov dropped his sleeve back into place and opened his hand. “I’m going to like having you around,” he said.

They left the hatch unlocked.

And why shouldn’t they? She couldn’t go anywhere—not only was she on a ship sailing northwest in the Indian Ocean, she couldn’t stand being around people. She only felt comfortable in the cage. She cursed the cage.

Kalinov visited her frequently, but never for long. He seemed to tire easily, and was rarely focused.

“How did you find me?” Holly asked him once.

“You flew over my house.” He tapped his temple. “I watched you fly away. I said, ‘Come back, Holly Bergman!’”

She lost sense of time. She slept as much as she could, willing her body to heal itself faster in case she had the chance to do . . . something. She curled up on the floor of the tiny compartment with her head on her bundled-up pressure suit. The cabin was hot enough that she stayed in her T-shirt—her flight suit unzipped with the arms tied around her waist—though the heat exacerbated the stink of the waste bucket they exchanged every time they brought her food. As often as he visited, Kalinov didn’t seem to mind the heat or the smell.

She got impressions from the sailors who dropped off her food and picked up the slop bucket. She learned that they weren’t sailing for a Russian port, but were bound for Bandar Abbas. Presumably the Iranians were going to let her captors transport her overland up to the Caspian Sea and from there into Russia.

“So, are you really taking me to your house?”

“Yes, we are.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s where I live.”

Every time the hatch opened or she woke up, she found new strength to set her defenses and probe her surroundings. After an indeterminate number of days, she unwound the wire conductor the doctor had installed on the hatch, and even though her impression of the guards on the other side became stronger she was able to tamp it down. Just as Doc Campos had promised, she was getting used to it—because she had to.

The ship’s doctor changed the dressings on her wounds, and apologized for her liv-

ing conditions. "I suggested that the Captain prepare a better cabin for you, but the men are afraid of you," he said.

"Are you?"

He shrugged.

"What about Kalinov?"

"He terrifies all of us."

"He says you're taking me to where he lives."

The doctor shrugged again, but he couldn't shrug away his thoughts. Holly bored into them and came away shaking. To the doctor it was rumor, innuendo, a scary story to frighten children, but nevertheless as real as snow in Siberia: a dacha near Grozny, as cute and cozy as any near Moscow, with gingerbread-house detailed carvings and its own little garden patch—surrounded on all sides by a lunatic asylum.

Did Kalinov live day by day in the center of a madhouse? If they got her that far, what would it do to her?

The doctor slapped her.

"It's true, then, isn't it? You are a witch."

Holly rubbed her cheek. "No. I'm an officer."

"You don't ask me any questions," Holly said to Kalinov. She kept her defenses up around him, to keep her thoughts and all the secrets she knew blocked from his perception. She hoped that if she slipped he wouldn't be able to make sense of anything she showed him.

The lieutenant shrugged, very much the way the doctor had. "I don't have to."

"Why not?"

He turned to look at her, and she noticed flecks of gold in his blue irises. He tilted his head to the side and stripped her mind.

It felt like having the most precious thing in the world stolen by her best friend. It felt like watching Gavin die of cancer, his body eaten away from the inside in seconds. It felt like all the sadness of a billion widows and orphans poured through her in an instant.

She came to herself, but it took a few seconds to recognize herself. He had blown past her defenses as if they weren't there, and left her feeling turned inside out.

Kalinov smiled. "Yes, I'm going to like having you around."

He left her then, lying on the deck plates, sweating and nauseous. It took several more minutes to realize she had soiled herself. The nausea passed, and Holly banged on the hatch with her good hand and asked for a bucket with some water in it.

She cleaned herself and her clothes, still shaking. She had to get away, even if she died trying. Not because the Code of Conduct said so, but because she could not endure that . . . *rape* . . . again.

Were her people looking for her? If they knew where she was, would they negotiate for her? They could deny everything about her—it might cause a bit of an uproar if the public learned that an Air Force psychic could pick up delicate impressions just by flying overhead in a specially-modified hypersonic fighter.

Gavin would ask what happened to her—what would they tell him?

No matter what happened, she had to try to get away.

Holly took down all the conductive bridges in the cabin. She twisted the thick wires together to make three stiff shivs, and used the hard steel bulkhead to sharpen the ends.

Through the insulated breaches in the cage, she reached into every sailor who came near. She learned the ship's layout, its status, and its position: in the Gulf of Oman, approaching the Straits of Hormuz—a half day or so out of Bandar Abbas.

Oh, Lord, let there be some SEALS nearby.

She pulled on the pressure suit, to have some extra padding, and put on her helmet. She dogged it down so she wouldn't lose it, grateful now for that sailor's kick that broke the faceplate seal: she would be able to breathe better.

She opened the hatch. She deflected the surprise the guard poured toward her and held up her still-bandaged right hand. "Could you help me with this?" she said.

She stepped toward him and shoved the sharp end of one of the twisted wires through his right eye and into his sinus cavity.

She spun on the second guard and yelled, "Don't!" He paused, a mix of fear and uncertainty on his face. Holly laid out her demands in rapid fashion. "You know what I am. I do not have to hurt you, but I will. I will make you beg for mercy—you will wish for a thousand of your father's beatings when I am through with you, unless—"

The sailor made the Sign of the Cross, but made no further move to run or raise the alarm.

"Help your shipmate," Holly said, "and do not stop me, and I will not harm you."

The sailor nodded, too frightened to speak. Holly ran past him, away from the officers' quarters and into the rear spaces of the ship. She couldn't fight her way out, but she reached ahead with her perception to find the clearest way to the deck through the sparse night watch.

She had to get into the open before she activated the backup beacon in her helmet; she needed to be sure its signal could get out. And she had to be quick: they might have jammers on board, cued to come on as soon as they detected a signal. The helmet transmitter was frequency-hopped, but over a fairly small portion of the spectrum; she hoped it would be enough.

She switched the helmet to battery power as she stepped onto the deck. The night was warm, almost sultry; it reminded her of summer evenings on the porch at her uncle's beach house.

Pale green status lights came on inside her helmet. She turned her head to tongue the emergency beacon on.

Her mind fell into a sinkhole. It had the same lighter fluid smell as the one she had probed from the sky, but this time the cat's-fur feel was rich with static electricity.

"No," Kalinov said. "I want you to come with me."

Holly stood still, but her mind spun with the ferocity of a hurricane. Lightheadedness and vertigo assailed her.

*I'll go with you.* She projected the thought as hard as she could, trying to force it up and out of the pit her mind was in. *But first you come to me.*

She felt Kalinov's surprise, and the maelstrom around her abated. *Yes, come to me. Hold my hand. But gently . . . it's hurt.*

She reached out her right hand. The young, mad lieutenant took it as gently as a child might pet a kitten or a duckling. The sinkhole filled in, the static crisped away, the smell lifted.

Holly grabbed Kalinov with her three good fingers. The pain sickened her, but she pulled him close. "Bastard," she said, and jammed one of her wire shivs into his throat.

He staggered back, too shocked and enraged to take any immediate action. He slipped on the deck and went down to one knee and his presence retracted; Holly became aware of the doctor and a half-dozen sailors watching the witch battle their wizard. No one went to Kalinov's aid, and maybe no one would interfere with her.

She tongued the beacon switch. The green light turned orange and started blinking. Almost immediately she got another indicator: an acknowledgement. Someone had heard her.

She retrieved her last shiv, grateful that her flight gloves combined dexterity with

a good grip. She pulled the right sleeve of her flight suit and pressure suit up above her elbow. "I want to go to my own home," she said, and gouged a furrow into her forearm. The shiv caught the implanted array and tore it in one smooth and excruciating moment through her skin. The pain took her legs out from under her.

With the array gone, the doctor, the sailors, and even Kalinov receded from her—or she from them. They became only ghostly faces in the night, and she felt as if a thousand friends had been immolated around her. She was alone again, with only herself in her own mind, and she fell forward on the deck and wept for her loss.

The doctor probed Holly's wound, even though the anesthetic hadn't kicked in. He grunted, apparently satisfied that it would close enough that he would not have to go to any heroic lengths. "This was the source of your power? And Kalinov's?"

Holly shrugged.

"I have seen many things," he said, "and now I have seen a witch kill a wizard, and then excise her own witchery." He swabbed her forearm and reached for the needle and silk.

"I didn't kill him," Holly said.

"You struck the first blow. Others struck the last, but the last does not come without the first."

"So what happens to me now?"

His speech became quite formal. "The Captain was pleased to inform everyone that his vessel rescued the United States' intrepid flyer far from where her automatic systems indicated she would be. He regrets, however, that radio difficulties prevented him from alerting anyone—even his own government—to his discovery. He regrets also the delay in returning her to her country, but his chief concern was tending to her injuries. Furthermore, he was afraid to approach the U.S. base in the British Indian Ocean Territory, because of the . . . delicate? . . . no . . . the precipitous nature of international relations at this time. He felt it prudent to proceed to neutral waters here outside the Persian Gulf, where an exchange could be arranged."

Holly stared at him until he turned his head and looked into her eyes. He shrugged.

When the last stitch was tight, he asked, "May I ask you a question?"

"Sure," Holly said.

He pointed to the jagged line of stitches down the inside of her forearm. "Why did you injure yourself? Why did you give up your power?"

Holly's mind was maddeningly silent as she thought the question through. The array was what made her valuable to the Russians, and what made her irresistible to Kalinov; disabling it, she hoped, would make her more of a liability than an asset. But at what cost? Even as the doctor wrapped gauze around her arm, she felt as distant from him as if she were on the moon. She may as well be back adrift at the bottom of the world; she was alone with herself again.

But there was more to it. Kalinov had been powerful, but unsteady—unstable. She couldn't risk turning into someone like him. Or meeting the same fate he did.

"If I still had that in me . . . if I was still a 'witch,' as you say . . . would you have let the men kill me, the way you let them kill Kalinov?"

The doctor tied off the gauze. He started gathering his implements. Holly flexed her right wrist, just a little, and felt the ticklish pain as the stitches worked against the layers of gauze around her forearm.

"Yes," he said.

Holly was a little surprised anyone came for her. But they landed a helicopter on the back of the Russian destroyer and flew her to a U.S. compound in Kuwait. They

## April/May 2012

rushed through a quick debriefing, including confirmation that P10 had not survived their bailout, let her call Gavin and cry with joy with him, and then sent her to get some rest.

The bed was hard, as if it was something from the nineties that had been put into storage and petrified. But it had sheets and a pillow. It felt marvelous.

She lay in that bed for a long time, missing a little bit the feeling of being bombarded by the emotions of nearby people. Would they want to give her a new implant? Would she let them?

Holly resisted the urge to turn on the television—she needed to get used to the loneliness of having only her own thoughts for company. It dawned on her that the room wasn't shielded; it wasn't secure; hell, it had a window. And after what Kalinov did to her, Holly felt as exposed as if she were naked. But she also felt free.

She flexed her right hand, and went to sleep. ○

Copyright © 2012 Gray Rinehart

# SOUVENIRS

Ian Creasey

**A collection of Ian Creasey's short fiction, *Maps of the Edge*, is now available. It contains several of his previous Asimov's stories such as "The Hastillan Weed" (February 2006), "The Golden Record" (December 2006), and "Erosion" (October/November 2009), together with stories from other venues. Details can be found on his website [www.iancreasey.com](http://www.iancreasey.com). The author tells us his newest tale is an old-fashioned story. It's inspired by the kind of SF he read when he was younger, which was full of bustling spaceports visited by traders with mysterious cargos from faraway worlds.**

The smell drifting from Tucker's Carvery tormented Kendra all morning. She'd had no breakfast, and only cheap nutri-gloop the day before. The Carvery's holo-sign boasted "Steaks From A Dozen Worlds" over its roaring exotic beasts, though market gossip said the meat wasn't imported, but grown from pirated cell-cultures—and if an alien dined there one planetfall, then next time he might find himself on the menu. Kendra tried to wrench her gaze from the sign and keep an eye on the crowd, looking for customers. Her throat felt raw; she'd been calling her wares since dawn. Now she found it too much effort to shout over the hubbub of beggars, other hawkers, the recorded spiel of the robochapel down the street, and the music pouring from all the bars and cafés around the market.

A deceleration boom briefly drowned all other noise, and reminded her of Treya's fascination with the shuttles and the starships they serviced. Kendra hadn't seen her children for ten days, since coming to Landing for the trade season, and she hadn't yet made a sale worth celebrating in their nightly vidcall. She smiled brightly at the jostling crowd, full of spacers on shore leave. Some had insignia tattooed on their cheeks, while others wore heraldic patches. Most of Kendra's targets refused to meet her eye; some of them were too drunk to focus, stumbling in gravity higher than ship-standard gee.

Toward midday, Kendra saw an alien's grey enviro-suit, emblazoned with a dark spiky flower on a yellow sun. The suit covered the wearer's whole body, and sported a sensor array on what she assumed was its head. She couldn't catch the spacer's eye, even if it had one.

The alien stopped anyway. Like most of her human customers, it towered over her by nearly half a meter. The spacer pointed at her merchandise and said, "What are these?"

"Souvenirs," said Kendra. "All unique, all local, all—"

"Yes, yes," said the alien, in a high, metallic voice that was probably a translator. "But what *are* they?" Its glove sprouted a manipulator, pointing at the front of her little table.

"That's a daggertooth's ripper. See the size? Dagger teeth can bite your arm off, but you don't see them around Landing now. Too dangerous to let live. A rare souvenir—yours for fifty scrip." Kendra paused, frustrated that she couldn't see the alien's reaction.

"These shells are twenty scrip," she went on. Not knowing whether the alien had an ear to hold a shell to, she didn't bother with her patter about listening to the seas of Beamish. "My children walk the shoreline and collect the prettiest."

Kendra couldn't see any body language or bored expression through the blank enviro-suit. She only knew the alien was still interested because it hadn't walked away. "Do you have souvenirs from other worlds?" she asked, knowing that many spacers picked up something on every planet they visited. If she could get the alien talking about its collection, she'd have a better idea of its fancies.

"The *Black Rose* has visited many stars." The alien touched the insignia on its suit, as if souvenirs embellished some appendage underneath.

"Then you'll be wanting something unusual," Kendra said. "If you have a little more to spend, I have some carvings. Local spicewood, lovely smell." Since she'd pawned her tools, she couldn't make her usual offer of a customized souvenir.

"Show me," said the alien. "This will mark a victory over our competitors."

Kendra smiled, and opened her box of more expensive items. "The beasts of Beamish," she said with pride, bringing out her carvings left over from last season. "A snark and a shambler, in spicewood. Those are two hundred. Or here's a dagger-tooth, carved from an actual tooth. A bargain at four hundred."

She suppressed her disappointment as the alien failed to react to the figurines she'd painstakingly crafted. Theatrically, she looked both ways and lowered her voice. "How about these stones? From the digs, a million years down. Could be gems, could be memory chips, could be anything. Five hundred scrip the lot."

The alien waved an arm dismissively, then pointed at something gleaming in the back of the box. "What's this?"

Kendra paused, remembering when she'd asked that same question.

"It's a snark scale!" Treya had said, holding it up in the sunlight. "Look at the shine. Can I keep it?"

"Not if you want your bones strengthened and your implants upgraded," Kendra replied. "I haven't got my carving tools now, so I need to sell all the gleanings."

"You never let us keep anything we find," Treya said.

Kendra hugged her daughter. "I'm sorry, dear. But times are hard."

"They're always hard," said Treya, who'd lately been teased for wearing hand-me-downs from her sister.

"I know. But spacers are picky. The more choice I can offer, the more money I'll make."

"If spacers have all the money, why don't we become spacers?" said Treya, with childlike logic.

"It's not that simple, darling—"

Treya stuck out her bottom lip, while Ottolie looked on with the superior gaze of the elder child. Ottolie's ambitions were more cerebral: competitive dreaming in the shadowscape that served as a distraction and consolation for so many of the planet's poorest folk.

"Tell you what," Kendra had said, tucking the scale into her purse. "If this doesn't sell, I'll bring it back after the season. Then you can have it."

With a start, Kendra realized that the alien had repeated its question. "What's this?" said the high-pitched, metallic voice.

"Snark scale," Kendra said flatly. "Very rare. One thousand scrip."

The suit's manipulator lifted it out of the box. The scale shimmered with irides-

cence, green and orange and violet in the bright sunlight. "And this is your best item?" said the alien.

Kendra nodded. "You'll not find another like that anywhere."

"I'll take it. The *Black Rose* thanks you." The alien dropped a scrip note onto the table, then strode away.

A thousand scrip! She hadn't seen such a large denomination since her husband died. Kendra wondered how best to spend the money. Some of it should go on mineral supplements—she didn't want Ottolie and Treya becoming dull-witted, thin-boned backwoods types who couldn't even say "selenium deficiency," never mind spell it. And children always needed various gadgets and upgrades, but that could wait until she brought her daughters into Landing.

She had a long list of necessities, yet most of them would be cheaper if she waited till the end of trade season. And her hocked tools were racking up interest charges by the day. It made sense to get them back first, especially as they might help bring custom. Sculpting drew the punters' attention. The more she looked absorbed in creating and heedless of selling, the more they admired her creations and thought about buying. Besides, she enjoyed carving. It made her feel like an artist, rather than a beggar.

Kendra wrapped up her trinkets, then dismantled the little table and reassembled it as a carry-case. She bought a nutri-shake with one of her few remaining small notes, while two buskers began arguing over the prime spot she'd vacated.

The cool, shady interior of the Golden Suns pawnshop felt heavenly to Kendra after standing outside all morning. Glass cabinets contained the curios of a hundred worlds, brought in by spacers and those who robbed them. Years ago, Kendra had often visited to marvel at the assorted oddments, while wondering how many of her own sculptures ended up in junk shops across the galaxy. But lately her visits had been for business, not window-shopping.

"Good morning," said Perran, his professional smile gleaming with jeweled teeth. The pawnbroker himself was as much a showcase as his display cabinets. "How are you today?"

Kendra flourished the thousand-scrip note. "Guess!"

"I see trade is good. You're redeeming the tools?"

She nodded. As Perran fed the note into the till, a loud beep filled the shop. The till's screen flashed a red "Counterfeit" message, and the note popped back out.

The pawnbroker shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't take this. Do you have anything else?"

Kendra grabbed the note and stared at it in disbelief. "That damned alien ripped me off!"

"I can see that. I'm very sorry." Perran hesitated. "I'm supposed to lock the door, which I can do by pressing this button, and keep you here until the Portmen arrive. But nowadays, my reactions aren't as fast as they used to be . . ."

Seething, Kendra took the hint and left. In the middle of the street, crowds eddying around her, she phoned the port and asked for the *Black Rose*.

"Duty officer," said a bored voice. Her screen showed a man with three-day stubble, reddened eyes, and an obvious hangover. His shoulder bore the same flower-and-sun patch that the alien had worn.

Kendra held up the false note. "Did you know that your crew are using counterfeit money?"

"We are not using counterfeit—"

"This is a fake! One of your aliens just gave it to me."

The officer sighed and rubbed his eyes. "We only have two aliens, and they've been shifting cargo all morning."

"I doubt it. I just sold a very expensive souvenir to one of them. And I want real money for it, or my scale back."

The *Black Rose* man shook his head. "I don't know what scam you're trying to pull, but it's stale. This is the second time today we've had this crap, and I'm tired of it. Find someone else to hassle."

The screen darkened. When Kendra tried to reconnect, the *Black Rose* wouldn't take the call. "Vack you!" she said to the blank screen. "Vacuum take you!"

She felt overwhelmed by all the frustrations and humiliations of life as a mere trinket seller, barely a half-step up from being a beggar. Her self-respect, too often quashed in the name of expediency, demanded action. She couldn't let herself be ground down yet again.

Kendra decided to visit the Port Office. If people wanted to fob her off, they could try it to her face. She joined the throng of spacers and dock workers heading for the port. Some were applying instant-sober patches to their wrists; others cursed or celebrated their bets; yet more carried bags and parcels from fashionable stores. She saw tall shuttles gleaming in the distance, and enormous black crates being winched down, cracked open, and argued over. The smell of burnt dust made her cough. She looked at all the sights, knowing that Treya would demand to hear about every detail.

Half an hour later she stood in the Port Office lobby, listening to piped music that didn't quite mask the roar of shuttles landing and taking off nearby. Her arms ached from lugging the trinket-case.

"I want to see the Portmaster," Kendra said.

The receptionist assessed Kendra's patched clothes, well-worn boots, and hawker's carry-case. "Yes, but does he want to see you?"

"He will when he hears the crew of the *Black Rose* have been passing counterfeit money."

"Have they?" The receptionist's attitude softened, and she gave Kendra a sympathetic look. "The Portmaster's very busy, but I'll see if I can fit you in. Have a seat."

Kendra took a free drink from the cooler, and glanced at the holo promoting the tangtree fruit's export potential. She flicked through a glossy brochure: *Beamish, Hidden Jewel of the Orion Rift—A CosmoCorp Planet*. None of the paradisial scenes showed the coastal shanty-towns where she and so many of her friends lived. Kendra examined the planetary icons publicized by the Port Office, assessing whether she could add them to her repertoire of souvenirs. If the tangtree became popular, she'd need to try carving its wood. She wished she had her tools, so she could sculpt instead of sitting in impatient idleness.

The receptionist approached, her heels clicking on the polished mosaic of the lobby floor. "The Portmaster's next visitor is late. You can slip in now, but make it quick."

Kendra entered a lavish suite full of sofas, tables, and power chairs, all overlooked by two huge window-screens showing views of the port and the market. A man in antique formal wear stood up to greet her. His unusual combination of red hair and dark complexion cut a striking figure.

"Portmaster Jahangir, at your service."

Kendra shook his proffered hand, and introduced herself. She described the morning's events in a few brief sentences, conscious that she'd be ejected as soon as the Portmaster's important visitor arrived.

"Counterfeit? We can't have that," Jahangir said. He called the *Black Rose* and asked for Captain Paschal. The duty officer still hadn't recovered from his hangover, but a smarter figure soon replaced him. Captain Paschal was short, well groomed, and in the middle of his lunch.

"I hope you're enjoying our local delicacies—let me know if you need any more samples." The Portmaster paused, then went on, "Sorry to interrupt your meal, but

I've had a complaint. The lady here says your crew have been passing counterfeit money."

Kendra recounted the incident again.

"Can you describe the crew member?" asked the captain.

"It was an alien, wearing a grey enviro-suit, with the same patch you have."

"You only saw the suit?"

"Yes, and he said he was from the *Black Rose*."

Captain Paschal snorted in disdain. "Anyone can say that. And anyone who can fake your money could fake our insignia."

Kendra began to protest, but stopped when Jahangir touched her hand.

"There's no proof yet," said the Portmaster. "But the initial evidence points to your ship, so we have to pursue it. Perhaps you could speak to your crew, and let me know the outcome?"

The captain shrugged. "I'll do that. But don't expect anything. You'd do better to ask who would benefit by causing us trouble."

"Indeed. We'll discuss this again later. Thank you for your time," said Jahangir, and closed the call.

"What did that achieve?" said Kendra, annoyed.

The Portmaster frowned. "You're not in the market now. The captains and I don't yell insults at each other. I told Paschal there's a complaint against the *Black Rose*. What I didn't say, but he knows very well, is that I won't let his shuttle leave until it's resolved—one way or the other."

"You can stop him?"

"I can stop their supplies—if that's justified. He had a point, you know. What if someone's trying to set up the *Black Rose*, and delay them with legal troubles? Trade advantage is often about being first to market. Some rival of theirs could be trying to outrun them."

"Then let's find the evidence," said Kendra. "Search for the snark scale."

Jahangir laughed. "How big is it?"

Kendra indicated the palm of her hand. The Portmaster focused the window-screen until one of the shuttles filled the view. From the size of people walking past, Kendra realized that the shuttle stood at least a hundred meters high.

"A search isn't practical—" Jahangir began.

A soft beep interrupted him, and the receptionist appeared onscreen. "Captain Gessner is here to see you."

The Portmaster said, "Send her through." He turned to Kendra. "While we're waiting for Paschal's response, I'll ask someone to check the video monitors to see if we can trace your customer, just in case he was too careless to cover his tracks. We'll call you if anything turns up."

Kendra knew she could expect nothing more. "I appreciate it," she said.

As she left the Port Office, Kendra paused by the front desk to thank the receptionist for her help. Then she started back toward the market. The weather had changed, a wind springing up to whip clouds across the sky and debris along the streets. Paper flowers, empty breathing bubbles, and losing betting slips all whirled by as if Landing were so busy that even the rubbish couldn't sit still.

Kendra knew she ought to go back to the square, reclaim her spot, and start hawking again. She had lost a lot of selling time, and she feared it had been wasted. The Portmaster had been polite, but what had he committed himself to? Nothing. His talk of settling the complaint "one way or the other" could mean just writing it off, on the excuse that the culprit couldn't be found. A thousand scrip meant a lot to her, but it was nothing to the Port. Kendra couldn't imagine that the Portmaster would really ground a shuttle for such a small sum.

She still had the counterfeit note. Could that reveal anything? There'd be no fingerprints or chemical traces, because the alien had handled it with suit manipulators. But it was the only avenue left.

Kendra walked uptown, to the richer parts of Landing where the streets didn't reek of decaying trash. She'd had little cause to come here before, and she had to ask directions to the Bank of Beamish, an imposing white building flanked with busts of all the personages pictured on the scrip it issued.

A clerk introduced her to Anona Ferber, Circulation Analyst, who had gray hair and wore blue-rimmed spectacles. She worked in a cramped, cluttered office; a spike of tangtree blossoms scented the air. Kendra accepted a glass of coffee and retold her story.

"Can I see the note?" said Anona. "I wondered when one would come in. We've had three alerts today."

At Kendra's puzzled look, Anona went on, "All the tills are connected to our database, which records every movement of every note. We spot counterfeits not only by examining the note itself, but also through checking that it's a valid issue and doesn't simultaneously exist elsewhere. And yet spacers think we're backward dirt-grubbers, just because we still use paper money."

She rustled the thousand-scrip note to judge the feel of it, like Kendra assessing spicewood before carving. "This is a rather poor copy. Trouble is, our system's so good at spotting fakes that counterfeiting is rare, so people don't worry about it."

"But can this note tell us anything about who created it?" asked Kendra.

"Let's see." Anona fed the scrip into a machine beside her desk. After a few seconds she laughed. "It's a very poor fake indeed. It fails on eight separate tests."

Kendra seethed at the implication that she'd been stupid to accept the note. "Just what are these tests?" she asked, trying not to show her irritation.

"Oh, most of them I'm not allowed to tell you," said Anona. "But I can describe the consistency check." She pointed to the note's serial number. "This printed number doesn't match the number encoded in the picture's fine detail."

Kendra frowned. "The visible number has been altered?"

"Yes. Presumably someone started with one genuine note, then varied the printed number on the copies so they wouldn't all look the same. Still, it means we know the serial number of the original note."

"And if the tills are all connected to your network, you know where that note is?"

"We know when it was last spent or given in change. But if it's in someone's pocket right now, it could be anywhere."

"Yes," said Kendra, "but the last transaction would give us a lead, wouldn't it?"

"I'll look it up." Anona queried the database and studied its readout. "The genuine note is now in the till at the Green Head. Someone spent it an hour ago."

"Then they might still be there," Kendra said. She stood up.

Anona shook her head. "You don't know that it's the counterfeiter. He could have spent the note elsewhere, and whoever's in the Green Head could have got it in change. I'll just check the history." She retrieved earlier records. "The original note came from our vaults two weeks ago, when we issued half a million scrip to the *Commercial Traveler* for their shore leave. And this is the first time it's been spent."

"Not the *Black Rose*?"

"No. But person-to-person transactions, like your sale this morning, don't get picked up by our system. So if a few spacers played poker, anyone could end up with the note, and we wouldn't know."

"Not until we find out, you mean. I'm going over there."

Kendra picked up her trinket-case and headed for the door, then decided that the case would only hamper her. "You must have a deposit box here. Could you keep this for me, please?"

She thanked Anona, and left. Outside, the temperature had fallen as more wind and clouds arrived. Kendra shivered. She knew the Green Head: a spacers' dive in the market, not far from her usual pitch. It would be another long walk in a day full of them. Flitters whizzed overhead, their occupants absorbed in reports and vidcalls. Anyone so poor they had to walk was literally beneath notice. As she trudged onward, Kendra reflected that Treya, so keen on starships and other worlds, had never even been in a flitter.

By the time she reached the market, Kendra had realized that she couldn't walk straight into the Green Head, in case the alien recognized her. So she visited Xanthe's spot in the square. Xanthe was another migrant from the coast, earning a living with old-fashioned magic tricks and face painting. They chatted sometimes, and two years ago Xanthe had painted Ottilie as a snark for her birthday, back when Kendra could afford such fripperies.

"Hello," said Xanthe. "Terrible weather, isn't it? No one stops to spend when it looks like rain."

"Then have you got a minute to do me?" asked Kendra. "I can't pay you now, but I'll owe you one."

Xanthe shrugged. "A model might bring some trade. Sit and smile, dear, while I paint you. And target the kids."

Kendra knew how to do that, having exploited pester-power a few times herself. If you could persuade children to want something, then their parents might grudgingly pay for it. For the next few minutes she tried to make eye-contact with fashionably dressed children wandering from stall to stall; she didn't bother looking at the beggar kids who sometimes tried to steal trinkets from her table. When a richly petticoated six-year-old smiled and pointed and tugged at her father's hand, Xanthe stopped work and turned to the new customer. Kendra tied a scarf over her hair, looked in the stall's mirror, and smiled. No one who'd only seen her for five minutes would recognize her under the multicolored scales now adorning her face and neck.

After thanking Xanthe, Kendra entered the Green Head. She wrinkled her nose at the smell of spiced beer and old carpets that had absorbed too many spills. Standing at the bar, she surveyed the customers. About half of them were spacers, clustered in three loud groups. The locals included several gamblers and good-time girls trying to relieve the offworlders of their scrip. Kendra couldn't see anyone wearing the *Black Rose* patch, and she didn't know what the *Commercial Traveler*'s insignia looked like. There were no aliens, but perhaps the enviro-suit had only been a disguise.

She asked one of the barmaids if anyone had spent a thousand-scrip note in the last couple of hours.

"We've had a few. Targeting the rich, are you?"

Kendra nodded, not wanting to explain the situation yet again.

"Don't bother with them—they're broke," said the barmaid, indicating a drunken trio who were trying to sing but couldn't agree on the words. "I remember that lot flashing a few big notes earlier." She nodded toward a larger group at the back of the room.

"And those?" said Kendra, pointing to the spacers playing 3D pool.

The barmaid shrugged and turned to serve another customer.

Kendra eyed her suspects at the far end. The men wore black two-pieces. Some of the women had bought local clothes, while others wore bizarre outfits from distant worlds, flaunting their asymmetric sleeves and angular wristbands. The group all had the same insignia, a red tattoo on their hand. Was someone at that table the counterfeiter, foolishly spending the model for his fake notes? He might not have realized the true note could be traced; or he might have passed it on to someone else.

Perhaps her customer this morning hadn't known the note was fake. But he'd been

unusually eager to buy an expensive item, and had ostentatiously mentioned a ship name; she should have been more suspicious at the time. With a surge of anger, she marched across and sat down at an empty table near the offworlders, close enough to hear their conversation.

The spacers were raucous, but so was the music. Kendra could only make out occasional phrases, and their talk was full of slang. Yet she soon grasped that this was the crew's last drink before leaving Beamish. And judging by how often they mentioned it, their check-in time was imminent.

So, the counterfeiter might be among this group after all—he had spent the true note because this was his last chance. But who was it? The minutes ticked by as Kendra wondered what to do.

As she became more attuned to the spacers' speech, she heard them mention the *Black Rose* in derisive tones. And she noticed one feminine voice in particular.

"Yeah? At least I wasn't so drunk that I threw up when we reached orbit." The speaker wore a dark jacket spangled with diamond stars; a silver chain glinted at her neck. Her voice had the right pitch and the right cadence. It didn't sound metallic, but that might have been the enviro-suit's distortion. Yet Kendra had only heard a few words this morning, and a few words now—hardly a match beyond doubt.

The spacers were finishing their drinks.

Kendra hurried to the bar and got a large glass of water. "Do you have an alarm to summon the Portmen?" she asked.

The barmaid nodded.

"Then I suggest you press it now."

As she walked back, Kendra pretended to trip, and flung the entire glass of water at the woman with the familiar voice.

"You vacking idiot!" said the spacer, taking off the soaked jacket and exposing a necklace underneath. From it dangled half a dozen trinkets—including the snark scale.

Instantly, Kendra grabbed the necklace and pulled it over the spacer's head. "Thief! Counterfeiter! Call the Portmen!"

The spacers swarmed on her, trying to wrench the necklace away. But Kendra gripped the scale so tightly that it cut deep into her hand. She huddled down on the floor, trying to protect herself from the rain of blows. Just before she lost consciousness, she glimpsed the shiny black boots of Portmen.

Three days later, Kendra sat with her daughters in Tucker's Carvery. In the hour since she'd picked them up at the terminal, they'd chattered non-stop about everything that had happened at home while she'd been away. Now, as Treya munched on an enormous starship-shaped cookie, Ottolie said, "How did you do?"

"Very well, thanks," said Kendra. "I earned enough to buy you both a few things." The Portmaster had rewarded her with a fraction of the *Commercial Traveler*'s huge fine for counterfeiting and fraud.

Her daughter nodded in an underwhelmed fashion, no doubt anticipating an uncomfortable bone-strengthening session at the adaption clinic. She was right, so Kendra said, "And . . ." She dragged it out, enjoying the suspense in Ottolie's eyes. "Afterward, we'll go to the Dreamery."

Ottolie smiled, but Treya only said, "Not offworld?"

Wearily, Kendra shook her head. "No, the money wasn't enough to take us away. But don't you see that if we went offworld, life might be just as hard as it is on Beamish? Right now, people on Earth are looking at the stars and wishing they were here, yet we could tell them that it's a lot less shiny than the brochures."

As always, this speech failed to dent Treya's enthusiasm. Kendra relented and said, "I have something for you."

She took the necklace from her pocket. The *Commercial Traveler* had been so keen to keep schedule, their offending crew member had left without it.

"The snark scale!" said Treya. "But what are these other things?" She fingered the strange knickknacks threaded onto the necklace: a golden claw, a vial of pale liquid, a thin stone leaf, and unidentifiable exotica that could be anything from library chips to sacred coprolites.

"They're souvenirs from other worlds," Kendra said.

Rapt, Treya scrutinized them for long minutes, ignoring her food. Then, at the roar of a shuttle taking off from the port, she gazed out of the window with a faraway look in her eyes.

Kendra sighed, and took Ottolie's hand. As she looked at Treya's yearning profile, she knew what her next sculpture should be. One day, she would be glad to have a souvenir of the time before her daughter bestrode the stars. ○

Copyright © 2012 Ian Creasey

## The Music of Particle Physics

is absolutely relative,  
precise and differential,  
linear and curved.

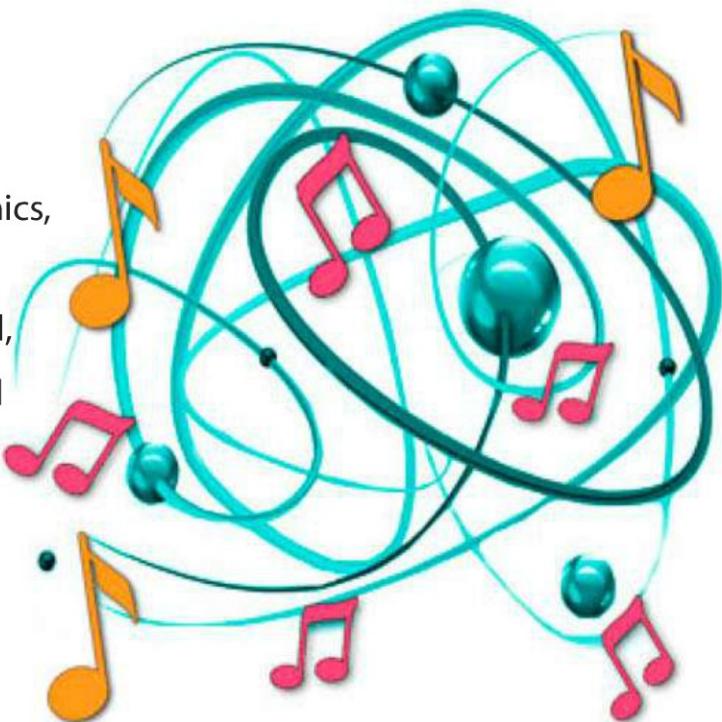
When you listen more  
and more carefully  
to its progressive  
chord progressions

and calculated harmonics,  
its convoluted waves  
of sound grow more  
particulate and fanciful,

with strange notes and  
a stranger resonance,  
like a room filled  
with milling strangers

at a crowded party  
you begin to wonder  
whether or not you  
should have attended,

where no one can find  
the host or tell you  
exactly what's in  
the hors d'oeuvres.



—Bruce Boston

Copyright © 2012 Bruce Boston

# SOMETHING REAL

Rick Wilber

**Rick Wilber is at work on a trilogy for Tor Books. The first book, *The Sweep*, is centered around his novella, "Several Items of Interest," which first appeared in the October/November 2010 issue of *Asimov's*. Rick is administrator of the Dell Magazines Award for Undergraduate Excellence in Science Fiction and Fantasy Writing and teaches journalism and mass-media courses at the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida. In his latest tale for us, the author reveals some unusual secrets about a man whose true-life story was more fantastic than the lives of characters in some of the most outrageous works of fiction.**

July 22nd, 1943

**B**aseball was a game of constant disappointment. You swing and you mostly miss. You think it's an easy grounder and it bad hops you. You're called out at third trying to advance on a single. The pop foul to end the game drifts away from your glove as you reach over the rail. One thing after another, one game after another, one season after another; all of this in an endless progression of childish mediocrity.

No wonder he was depressed. Surely there were better things to do with one's life than catch and throw and swing a stick at baseballs.

Moe Berg, M.S., M.A, Ph.D., LL.D., was a well-educated man, a scholar, a man of great promise. Yet here he sat, a baseball player, in the dugout at Comiskey Park watching the rain fall and gather into puddles atop the tarp that covered the infield. The puddles rippled in the wind, tiny oceans getting wider by the second. It had been raining steadily for a half hour and then moments ago there'd been a bright bolt of lightning and an immediate and massive crack of thunder. And now it was really pouring. Surely the game would be called in the next few minutes.

Moe had two hits on the day, a very nice opposite field homer to right, thank you very much, and a rare triple into the gap in left. The Sox were in front by six runs after three innings, but now none of that would matter; the would-be victory would disappear into the hiss of the rain and Moe's home run and triple wouldn't exist past today.

Perfect, just perfect. Like his season, like his whole career, like his life; the occasional good days were always washed away by a gray, cold rain. Now, instead of this one good day at the plate, there'd be a doubleheader tomorrow and he'd probably go 0 for the day or something close to that.

Every now and again it occurred to Moe that perhaps his father was right, per-

haps it was time to retire from this child's game and get started on real life. Perhaps it was time to do something that mattered, something real.

### December 12th, 1944

Moe Berg looked around the room. The thick wool drapes, so purple as to be nearly black, were tied back to allow the sunshine to spill through the narrow, tall windows that marched along the left side of the small lecture hall at the Physics Institute at the Eidgenossische Technische Hochscule, the ETH. The bright warmth of the room was a welcome luxury for a cold, December day in neutral Zurich.

Berg had heard just an hour ago that a few hundred miles away from this very spot Patton's Fifth Army was out of gas for the Shermans. This meant Von Rundstedt didn't need to worry about an Allied relief column and so, short of a miracle like the clouds and fog clearing out unexpectedly so the P-47s could get back into business, the Nazis' Sixth SS Panzer under Dietrich was going to break through Bastogne at any moment and from there it would be easy going as the tanks headed toward the fuel tanks in Antwerp. Christ, the war might go on for another year or two.

A narrow lectern stood at the front of the room. A blackboard on wheels was behind the lectern, and there were two dozen wooden chairs in tight, perfect rows in front of the lectern. There were no empty seats and an extra dozen people stood against the radiators at the back of the room. Paul Scherrer was there, of course, and nodded and smiled when he saw Berg. Marcus Fierz was there, too, and Gregor Wentzel, Wolfgang Pauli, Ernest Stuckelberg. And up in the front row, at the corner, Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker.

Berg sat in the second row, where he was close enough to get the job done. He'd scored a marksman rating with a service revolver at this kind of distance. That was one reason he was here.

His pal, Paul Scherrer, had managed to get him the invitation to this speech, listing him as an Italian physicist working with Fermi in Rome. Berg felt bad about that. If he did do the job, it would get out soon that Scherrer had been involved. That would be messy; there were Nazis everywhere in Zurich. Berg had told Piet Gugelot, the Dutch Jewish physicist, how to follow up on the arrangements to get Scherrer and his family out of Switzerland and down into Italy. From there, with Fermi's help, they could all get to the States. Berg didn't expect he'd be able to help with any of that, since he wouldn't survive more than a few seconds after taking action against Heisenberg. Too many Nazis in the room, all of them armed. Once they realized that the Italian physicist named Antonacci was, in fact, an American assassin they'd act quickly.

Berg did look like he belonged in this crowd: brown shoes, slacks, tweed jacket. He'd thought about smoking a pipe but decided he wouldn't look natural enough doing that; otherwise he fit right in.

He'd earned a little credit, he hoped, by working his way into a couple of the interesting conversations on S-matrix theory that had been going on in the hallway outside before the door opened to the room. Berg liked the elegance of the math and had said so to several people, citing examples. They'd nodded and agreed, then bounced ideas off one another for a few minutes until the classroom door opened and, along with the others, Berg had walked in and taken a seat.

He crossed his right leg over the left and sat back, relaxed, as the last few stragglers came in, looking for a little space in which to join those who stood at the back. The last to come through was a tall, very attractive woman. Stuckelberg rose and offered her his seat and she took it.

Berg knew this woman. A real looker, tall, thin, black hair, red lips, wearing a very businesslike dress with padded shoulders and a vest. He wondered if there wasn't a gun hidden somewhere in all that fabric.

He'd seen her several different times over the past couple of years. He was certain of it; he had a very good memory for such things. The first time, back in '41, she'd been sitting in the box seats, front row, behind the home dugout in Comiskey as the White Sox did battle with the Browns on a Sunday in June. Not much of a crowd there, the Sox being all right but the Brownies miserable. Berg had played first that day and had himself an RBI double and then scored on an Alex Irvine single. He'd tipped his cap to the few fans who were cheering after he'd crossed home and was heading toward the dugout. She'd smiled at him. He'd winked back and then had the batboy take a note up to her saying he was staying at the Piccadilly Hotel on Wabash, and he'd be pleased to celebrate the day's win by taking her out to dinner. He'd look for her at eight o'clock in the lobby. The chophouse had great steaks, but she didn't show.

The second time, a year later, he'd been in London, at the Claridge, working on Al-sos. She'd been sitting in the lobby reading the *Times* and had lowered it to watch him walk by, smiling at him knowingly. He'd smiled back, but he was already late for the meeting with Carvelli to make the final arrangements for Italy and Fermi, and so he didn't have the time to do more than smile and nod. She'd nodded back, still smiling. An hour later, when he walked back out through the lobby, she was gone.

The next time, in Paris just a couple of months later, he felt a friendly tap on his shoulder, then heard her say, "Bonjour, Monsieur Berg," as she'd walked by him one evening on the Pont Neuf, where he'd been leaning on the railing, watching a barge go by on the Seine below. He'd turned, embarrassed that he hadn't noticed her until after she'd touched him, but she was already walking away, half-turning to wave goodbye. He was waiting for a contact and couldn't leave the spot and had to watch her go. He felt dizzy and nauseous for a moment and when that passed he turned back toward the Seine and the same barge from before was somehow upstream and starting its way down again to go under the bridge as he watched. There was no explaining that and he was afraid to mention it to anyone: they'd pull him out of there and bring him home as a head case, probably, and he didn't want that.

The last time, six months ago in Rome, he'd been sitting outside under the awning at the Trattoria Monti on Via di San Vito, with Fermi, talking about what Italy had been like under Mussolini before the assassination in '38. A dirigible, a fast little Enzo on sentry duty, chugged by overhead. Fifty miles north was the Lateran Line and north of that there were Germans, a lot of them. Here in Roma, though, the sun was shining and Italy was Italian again.

Enrico was talking when she walked by: "Yes, Moe, all of Italy was ours, but the price was so very high. Spies everywhere (as though there weren't any now, Berg thought to himself), and one feared for one's soul." Enrico smiled. "When the coup d'etat was successful, we all thought the nightmare had ended; but, of course, it wasn't so simple."

She'd been hard to miss in her outfit; blue shorts and a white blouse with a blue scarf and a sailor cap. Her hair was different, red, and she seemed taller somehow, but it was hard to say. And she was stunning.

Enrico, who had turned to look at her, said "Buongiorno."

She buongiornoed right back to Enrico, then looked straight at Berg, smiled, said, "Ciao, Signor Berg," and walked away. He winked at Enrico, then rose from the table to follow her, caught up with her by the time they reached the Trevi Fountain, reached out and grabbed her arm so he could finally talk to her and find out what the hell was going on. But then he'd stumbled, went down to his knees, sick to his stomach for a few moments, and when that passed he looked up and she was gone. As was the Trevi Fountain. He was standing next to the Colle Oppio gardens and there, a few blocks away, was the Coliseum. Jesus Christ. He shook his head and began to walk back to Enrico. Good thing the café was close.

\* \* \*

So he wasn't surprised to see her here, though she was a major complication, and Berg didn't like complications. He had a job to do here, dangerous work, and if she had been in Chicago, and London, and Paris, and Rome, and now was here, then she was in on it somehow. One side? The other? Some other side completely? He didn't know. He didn't like not knowing. He had to ask himself why he hadn't brought her up with John Shaheen, his handler.

He shifted in his chair, putting both feet back on the floor. He could feel the uncomfortable tug of the athletic tape that held the tiny Beretta tightly against his groin. Well, there was nothing he could do about her right now. He was here, and today was today, and that was all there was to it. He had a job to do.

The door at the side of the room opened again and in walked Werner Heisenberg. There was a smattering of polite applause from the gathered scientists. How do you greet a colleague and friend, and one of the world's great minds, when he's brilliant but working for the Nazis? Heisenberg was in charge of *Uranverein*, the Uranium Club, which is to say, Hitler's A-bomb program.

But this wasn't about that, at least for everyone but Berg, so when Paul Scherrer walked to the podium to introduce Heisenberg, Berg sat back in his chair and made sure to look calm and relaxed. Time to listen. Very carefully.

### September 15th, 1943

A dismal season was winding down. Moe Berg had played first base again and gone 0 for 5 as the Sox lost to the Yankees. Berg's contribution to the humiliation had been three strikeouts and an error on a groundball.

In the clubhouse after the game the air was thick with cigar smoke, grumbling, and Monarch beer to drown the various sorrows. Moe sat, disappointed, on a folding chair in front of his open wooden locker. He was contemplating what an 0-for-5 day can do to your psyche and your season and your career when you're in your thirties, when he heard a throat clear behind him. Damn sportswriters.

He turned and instead of the rumpled, old suit and beat-up fedora that he expected, it was a man dressed in trousers with a tight crease, a vest, an expensive coat and a bowtie; no hat, glasses, smoking a Camel.

"Mr. Berg? Moe?"

Berg shook his head. "I'm not speaking to the press, friend. I made that clear last week. No quotes, no off-the-record, nothing, till this slump is over. Got it?"

The man smiled, and was nice enough to not get into whether a .210 season batting average is still a "slump" or not. "I'm not with the press, Mr. Berg. My name is Huntington, Ellery Huntington. I'm here at the request of a man named William Donovan. He'd like to meet with you."

Berg frowned. "The Donovan who was a war hero in the Meuse-Argonne? And then the district attorney up in Buffalo? I believe I met him once, a few years ago. We shook hands and I autographed a ball for him."

"You have an excellent memory, Mr. Berg."

He did, in fact, have that excellent memory. And an IQ of 180. And a doctorate in classical languages from Princeton and a law degree from Yale. And yet he was playing baseball in Chicago and, mostly, going 0-for-the-day. So: "What would the district attorney and war hero want with a baseball player, Mr. Huntington?"

"Mr. Donovan is no longer a district attorney, Mr. Berg. He now works for the federal government. He's more interested in your language skills than your batting average."

Berg allowed himself a sad chuckle. "That's a good thing. Have you seen my batting average?"

Huntington smiled back. "Mr. Donovan has looked at those photos you took in *Something Real*

## April/May 2012

Japan during the Sox tour back in '37. Those snaps are very good. And he knows you speak French and German. He understands that you are something of a science buff, as well."

"And Italian. And Spanish. And Hebrew. And a few more. And I read a lot, Mr. Huntington. Science is one of the things I read, along with the sports pages in the newspapers."

"And the front pages?"

"Yes, and the front pages."

"We felt certain of that, Mr. Berg. And we feel certain, too, about your patriotism. Mr. Donovan would like to talk to you about that, about your patriotism. He knows you've tried to enlist, but the Army wouldn't take you."

"Or the Navy, Mr. Huntington. They don't like the shape of my feet. But if your Mr. Donovan has found a way I can take part, I'm all for it. Do I have time to take a shower and comb my hair?"

Huntington smiled again, and nodded. "Of course, Mr. Berg, take your time. And then we'll head over to our hotel and you and Mr. Donovan can have that conversation. Does that sound all right?"

Moe thought about his slump. The season wasn't young anymore and neither was he. And there were guys fighting and dying in Europe and he'd been thinking a lot about how he ought to be involved in that, flat feet or not.

He looked up at Huntington. "Give me ten minutes."

And that was all it took. Ten minutes, a taxi ride, and a five-minute conversation with Wild Bill Donovan.

## December 12, 1944

Berg watched Heisenberg smile weakly. He spoke in German: "Hello, everyone, it is good to be here, and to see so many of my friends and colleagues from better days. May those days return soon. And for those of you who are students at this fine university, I greet you warmly and celebrate your learning. I will leave time enough at the end of this discussion to answer questions."

He paused, smiling again slightly. "Please, friends, colleagues: let us step away from the war for just this brief time and focus our attention on the matter at hand, S-matrix maths. I will gladly take questions on that afterward, but outside the scope of that discussion I can take no questions. I am sure you understand."

Berg understood. The Gestapo was here in one guise or another; and there were others in the room, too, no doubt, who would report back to Berlin on what Professor Heisenberg had said, starting with that weasel von Weizsäcker. The Professor was smart enough to stay out of trouble and focus on S-matrix theory, as advertised.

## August 12, 1944

Lake Maggiore was warm in the shallows and then colder, much colder, the farther out Moe Berg swam with his new pal, Enrico Fermi. They were headed out to the raft anchored near the marker buoys for the swimmers.

It was a muggy day, and after a long bicycle ride together along the Via Roma the two men, Italy's finest physicist and the American baseball player, had pedaled through the village of Pino and out to the narrow strand of beach along the lake. Just a half-mile away the Via Roma changed names and became the Dufourstrasse on the Swiss side of the border. In a couple of hours they would be having lunch with Paul Scherrer, who had asked for the meeting.

They'd risked coming here because the meeting with Scherrer was important to the whole project, though the meeting was fraught with risk. A ferry ride up from Rimiini to Venice, skirting the Nazi-occupied portions of Italy, then a long, harrowing

flight up to and then through the southern edge of the Dolomites in an Enzo Massimo dirigible that finally got them to Maccagno and the lakeshore. A real nail-biter, that blimp ride, but then it was done and they'd walked into town from the field and found their pensione, had a good meal, rented the bikes for today, shared a bottle of wine, and then hit the sack. Now, here they were, within an easy mile by bike of the meeting and with a few hours to kill. A cool swim seemed like a good idea, and then they'd get up to town, cross the border into Switzerland, and hear what Scherrer had to say.

Berg wasn't himself, palling around here with Fermi, a guy he really liked. Here, for now, Berg was Mario Antonacci, a wealthy industrialist and shipbuilder from Brindisi, a man of substance who had stopped building warships for Mussolini after the coup and had then gone back to building freighters for the Matteotti government, which ran things south and east of the Lateran Line. Strictly neutral, Matteotti and his pals, the only way to stay alive with the Germans in control of the northwest portions of Italy.

Fermi climbed up the ladder of the wooden raft and sat down next to Berg. "It's beautiful here," he said in Italian, leaning backward to get his face to the mountain sun.

"Ed è tranquillo," Berg said, "a separate world, away from the war."

Fermi shook his head. "Not separate enough, I think. Look there," and he pointed east. Tiny dots marched across the sky in formation. "American bombers aiming for Munich, perhaps?"

"Wiener-Neustadt, I think, near Vienna. There's a Messerschmitt factory there."

"Ah." Fermi stood. He was slightly built, thin, about five foot eight. Unprepossessing. But he was a towering figure where it mattered, in physics. Fermi was one of the handful of scientists who could stand next to Heisenberg in matters of intellect. Fermi, Bohr, Oppenheimer, Weizsäcker, Hahn. The list was a short one, and with Einstein's macabre death in '38, had lost its titular head. Now it was up to Heisenberg or Oppy to see who'd be the one to change the world. Berg wondered if Fermi realized this. Well, if he didn't realize it yet he would in a couple of hours. Time to go meet with Scherrer and see about saving the world.

### December 12, 1944

Trouble was, as the afternoon lecture wore on, when it came to S-matrix theory, or the scattering matrix as Herr Professor called it, Heisenberg didn't seem to have anything new to say.

Berg had done his homework, reading up on John Archibald Weaver's paper from 1937, which coined the "scattering matrix" term as it described coefficients that connected the asymptotic behavior of an arbitrary particular solution with the set of solutions of a standard form. What Heisenberg had done was take it farther; using the S-matrix idea to mathematically pick out the most important features of the theory, the ones that he tried to prove wouldn't change over time. He published this work in the German journals. The OSS had a copy of every article. Berg had read, and understood, them all. There was a reason Moe Berg was the agent who was here, listening, assessing, making a decision, a choice. That reason had nothing to do with being a light-hitting infielder for the Chicago White Sox.

But the sunlit room was warm with everyone packed in, even with the radiators shut off as Switzerland dealt with its coal shortage. And despite the months of preparation, despite the Beretta taped to his groin, despite the lives that had been put at risk to get him here: despite all that, Moe Berg began to drift off, the S-matrix discussion so ordinary that it was lulling, his eyelids growing heavy as he jerked awake sharply once, cursing himself for his foolishness, and then again, before resorting to pinching, hard, the skin between his right thumb and forefinger.

That worked, and he was focused again on the S-matrix, at least long enough to get to the question period, where he might learn what he needed to know. Were Heisenberg and his team on the right track for an atom bomb? Would the Germans get the bomb before the Allies did? If he thought that was the case, Berg would excuse himself, go to the men's room and get into a stall, unbutton his pants and drop them, pull the Beretta loose from where it was taped to the groin, re-button the trousers and then walk back into the room, the Beretta in his pocket. There, with no hesitation, before anyone could act to stop him, he would kill Werner Heisenberg, cut off the head of the snake that was the great bomb. A lot of lives, hundreds of thousands of them, maybe millions, would depend on Berg's aim.

He was awake now, and sharp, thinking it through. Ten minutes more, maybe fifteen, and the moment might come as the speech ended and the questions started.

Then there was a quick rap at the lecture room door and everyone watched as the door opened and in came a man in a suit, a blond German missing his right arm so he was, no doubt, a veteran of one front or another who'd found something useful to do for the local Gestapo or the embassy.

They were all watching, thirty-six of the brightest minds in European physics outside of the missing, and brilliant, Jews, as the man walked over and handed Heisenberg a note, then clicked his heels officially, spun around, and walked briskly back out the door.

Heisenberg was expressionless, the blank look on his face something he must have mastered after years in the service of Hitler. "Excuse me, please," he said and turned his back to the room to read the note.

Did his shoulders sag a bit as he finished? Berg thought maybe so, but Heisenberg was smiling thinly as he turned back to face his audience.

"Colleagues, I have received information to the effect that Baron von Rundstedt's Sixth Panzer has broken through at Bastogne and is racing toward Antwerp. I have been asked to relay this information to you. There is more I would like to say about this turn of events, but this is, of course, neither the time nor the place."

And he turned his back to the room again and walked over to the chalkboard. There was no "Heil Hitler," and instead, he started furiously writing formulae for the S-matrix discussion, scribbling on the chalkboard in Zurich while Von Rundstedt's tanks rumbled toward Antwerp and the oil tanks filled with fuel that sat there, nearly defenseless, ready to be milked. If this news was right, the war might go on for years, giving Germany time to finish a bomb and build the rockets to deliver it. Well, all the more reason to listen closely for some hint. Any hint.

Heisenberg finished and put the chalk onto the narrow tray at the bottom of the board before walking back to the podium and asking for questions. This, Berg hoped, would tell the tale.

But it didn't. Paul Scherrer wanted to know about Ads/CFT correspondence and Heisenberg went into a long, rambling response that amounted to "We'd all like to know the answer to that." Then Wentzel got into a question about the analyticity of the first, and Heisenberg went back to the chalkboard to erase the previous formulae and put up some new ones, talking as he jotted them down, explaining things. There were lots of nods and murmurs.

This went on, but never in the direction that Berg was hoping for. It wasn't going to be that easy. There was, ultimately, no hint of anything else, anything that mattered. Berg left the Beretta taped where it was and was left, in the end, to wonder if Von Rundstedt's success was enough on its own to require the death of Heisenberg. Maybe, just maybe.

When the questions ended Heisenberg looked tired but relieved. He thanked everyone and then Scherrer returned to the podium and thanked them all for com-

ing. There would be a reception at 7 PM at Scherrer's house tonight, #27 Versterstrasse, in District 2 on the west side of the lake. They were all invited.

The audience stood and gave Heisenberg another polite round of applause as he exited, and then, slowly, chatting with one another all the while, headed for the one open door. It was a slow process.

Berg was lost in thought as he ambled slowly in line. He'd heard nothing that had given him a definitive reason to pull the trigger; but the question had changed, really, and now he had to factor in a longer war. He needed a little time to think it through. Heisenberg would be at Scherrer's party later tonight, and then another reception tomorrow at the German embassy. Heisenberg liked long, contemplative walks and he'd be coming and going on foot to these social occasions. Berg had two more opportunities to kill him. The first one was tonight, probably in Backer Park on Hohlstrasse, which stood between the Baur a lac hotel and Scherrer's home. It would be dark. It would be very easy.

And if not there and then, tomorrow would do, but that was trickier, in the daylight. That would have to be a sidewalk encounter, one shot, very clean, and then try to disappear into the crowd.

But, first, in either case he had to decide, and he needed a little time to puzzle it through. It would be good to talk to Heisenberg first somehow, perhaps at tonight's party, get a feel for things, all of it very sociable. And then, maybe, kill him. Berg had never killed a man, but that was what most of the training had been for. That moment. Pull the trigger. Save the world. Maybe.

He was just out the door and into the hallway when he felt a touch on his left shoulder, heard a deep, warm female voice speaking very quietly in German: "Yes, you must decide, Moe—may I call you Moe?—and very soon. So much hangs in the balance, yes?"

He turned to look at her. She was nearly his height and even more attractive up close, perhaps in her mid thirties, black hair, not a lot of makeup, some real strength of character showing in how she looked right back at him, assessing him just as he did the same to her.

He steered them both out of the queue and down a side hallway. No use pretending: "I saw you in Chicago. And then in London, Paris, Rome. And now here. What gives?"

She smiled. "And the answer better be a good one or you'll use that Beretta on me, right, Moe? But only after you've dropped your pants and untaped it." She laughed. "Sometimes you do better, you know, Moe. Sometimes you *have* untaped it and you're ready to go."

So she knew about the Beretta. What the hell?

They walked back into the main hall and then, quietly, with everyone else, out of the building and onto the Zweillerstrasse. She chatted briefly about the weather; colder than last year, no?

Berg could be patient. She knew way too much, but he was about to find things out, and there was nothing he liked better than learning.

Finally, at the far end of the Hottingen bridge, near the dark park, they'd left the crowd behind and, alone, they stopped to lean on the railing and look at the cold water below, ice just starting to form on the rocks that rose above the stream.

"I have something to tell you, Moe," she said. "It is very important."

"Sure," he said, "it's important," but they both knew he wasn't about to believe anything she said, not without establishing who she was and who she worked for.

"I work for a firm that you don't know anything about yet, Moe," she said, reading his mind again. "And later tonight I'm going to tell you about our firm. You won't believe me, of course, but then I'll prove it to you. I'll also prove to you that Werner Heisenberg has to die, and soon."

"Tonight, after the little party at Scherrer's house. You must walk with Heisenberg through the park, chatting about the S-matrix and, perhaps, the weather. There will be no talk of the war, or the super-bomb. There in the park, at a spot I will take you by in a few minutes, you must use your Beretta to shoot Heisenberg. It must take three shots to make certain he is dead. The first shot has to be above the left ear. The second, as he begins to crumple, has to be to the back of the head. The third, as he lies there, face up, must be to the forehead. You will be wearing your gloves in the cold, so there will be no need to wipe the weapon. You will simply toss it into the nearby bushes and walk away."

Berg stared at her for a few moments. He wished like hell he'd put the Beretta in his pocket. "You know a lot. Too damn much, in fact."

"I do know a lot, Moe. I know everything in this line, in fact, from this point forward. You, me, Heisenberg, the bomb, lives saved and lives lost. It's all right there in front of me, like reading a newspaper, as long as you stay here. You like reading the newspaper, don't you, Moe?"

He did, in fact, like reading the newspaper, liked it so much he bought two or three each day and read them slowly over coffee in the morning, savoring the easy enjoyment of reading the paper, where everything was solidly black and white, clear-cut, sharp-edged, clean. Very clean.

She stared at him, dead serious. "Problem is, Moe, there are a lot of pages in those newspapers, and different things are happening on different pages. It's all on the same day, it's all the news that's fit to print, you know? But certain things have to go in a certain order, Moe, or I won't be able to help."

He moved to her, pressed himself against her, reaching down to put his right hand over her left one on the bridge railing. A moment of dizziness and he thought he might go to his knees, but he steadied. Then he thought he could kill her now if he had to. Knock her back over the railing and into the water. Get the Beretta as she lay there. Walk down, fire once or twice, then walk away.

She smiled, pressed back with her hips, looked at him closely. "Look up, Moe, and toward the south, back across the bridge."

He stared at her.

"It's all right, Moe. You're the one with the gun taped to his balls. Me, I'm just one of the girls. Go ahead, look up."

So he did, and saw, in the night sky, a half-dozen planes of some kind, nearly silent, swift, rushing over Zurich.

"Whose are they?"

"German fighters, Moe. Jet fighters, a whole new kind of airplane."

"Yeah. So?"

"You know, Moe, you know very well. Those fighters are better than anything the Allies have. And there's a jet bomber that's in trials right now. A month, maybe less, and it will be in production. It has a range of six thousand miles, Moe. You know what that means."

He did know. "How'd you know those fighters would be there?" She was, perhaps, a Nazi, a double-agent of some kind. Christ, this was complicated.

"I've seen them before, Moe. Several times. And I've seen the bomber in action, too. I've seen it carry a super-bomb, Moe. For six thousand miles."

It was ridiculous, sure. But those fighters. And the stuff she seemed to know. "Look, I don't get it. Who the hell are you?"

"I'm someone like you, Moe. Someone who believes in a world that can be better than this one. Someone willing to do what I must to stop this evil before it ruins everything."

He pushed against her, harder, squeezed that hand against the railing. Jesus, he

was getting worked up by doing this, by pressing against her. Women didn't usually get this kind of rise out of him.

He felt her hips push back against him. She smiled. "There's a lot I can't tell you yet, Moe. There's a lot you're going to have to find out for yourself. But we're on the same side, you and me, and I can tell you this. There was a freighter in Lorient two months ago, the *Bremen*."

"I know about the *Bremen* and the deuterium."

"But you've been told there was a commando raid and the *Bremen* was sunk, Moe."

How the hell? "Yeah," he admitted, "that's what I've been told. So no heavy water means no plutonium means no super-bomb, at least not anytime soon. It would take another year for them to isolate more."

He paused. "But if this Von Rundstedt thing is true and there's more time to isolate more deuterium . . ."

Now she wasn't smiling. She pushed him back off her and he let it happen, releasing her hand from the bridge rail, pulling back. "It's worse than that, Moe. They'd offloaded more than twenty tons of the heavy water before the raid. The Germans were happy the *Bremen* was sunk. It lets the Allies think the *Uranverein* can't make the super-bomb. But the Allies are wrong, Moe. Terribly wrong."

"So they can make enough plutonium for a bomb," he said, flatly.

"Yes. Maybe two bombs, Moe. Two of them! Maybe the first for London, and the second for who knows where. New York?"

"It's too late already?" He believed her now, but if this was true why kill Heisenberg?

"Certain matters are at a critical point, Moe. At the moment, the bomb they are building is too big to be useful: it's the size of a boxcar, maybe bigger. And to keep it hidden it's been built in caves in Zugspitze. You know where that is, in Bavaria."

She said that with certainty. He nodded.

"Heisenberg is personally working on ways around the problem, Moe. He can't be allowed to succeed."

Did Heisenberg even want to succeed? That was really the question, thought Berg, but he didn't voice it.

"And if I kill Heisenberg this will end it? The bomb won't be used? The Nazis will finally lose this war?"

"It will slow things down, Moe. And in the world as it is right now, right here, there's a chance. If Rommel doesn't take Cairo, and if Patton wheels west and turns for Amsterdam. Yes, there's a chance that might end it here. But for you, Moe, no, this is not the end of it."

He looked at her. "I don't know what you mean. What's next?"

"I have to go now, Moe. See," she said, pointing at nothing, a park bench maybe over at the edge of the grass, "there's a door. I have a deadline and I can't possibly be late."

She turned to face him, reached up with both hands to hold his face, brought him to her, so close, so very close. "You're going to like this, Moe. You're going to do important work." And then she finally kissed him; hard and long, before pulling away and turning to leave him.

"Sure," he said to her back as her heels clicked against the stone path. "Sure, it's important work." He raised his voice. "Hey, what the hell does that mean? And who the hell are you? I don't even know your name."

She stopped, turned around. "You'll know everything sometime soon, Moe, I promise you. You're important. Know that, Moe Berg. Know that you're important."

"I'll see you again?"

"Oh, yes, in a way. After all, we have a lot to do, you and I."

She turned back again and stepped off the stone path to walk through the brown, winter grass and into the darkness of the park, and then she wasn't there.

Berg undid his belt and reached down to his groin to pull free the Beretta. There was a brief moment of pain as the athletic tape came free and then he had the gun and was buttoning up again and putting it into his pocket. The smart thing to do was get to Scherrer's house and get back on the job: find Heisenberg, talk to the man, make a damn decision.

But where the hell had that woman gone? He wanted to know. He needed to know, in fact, and so he pulled the Beretta back out of his pocket and walked after her: across the cold, winter grass and along the route he'd seen her take through some bushes and next to that plane tree.

There was a tingle, that dizziness, that moment of nausea, a sense of something—electricity?—in the air, but nothing else. She was gone. No footprints in the grass, no way to guess how she'd departed. Hell.

It was cloudy, dark, with snow starting to fall. But Scherrer's house had to lie in that direction, through this little park and down onto the Seestrasse and on toward the lake. Hadn't the sky been clear a moment ago? Oh, hell. He pulled up his coat collar, shoved the Beretta back into the coat pocket, and started walking.

### August 12, 1944

Moe Berg and his two pals, Enrico Fermi and Paul Scherrer, sat in slat wooden folding chairs at a very shaky wooden table at the Café Maggiore in the Swiss village of Dinella. About two hundred meters away, to the west, was the border with Italy, where Moe and Enrico had left their bikes. The act of leaving their bikes behind had pleased both the Italian Carabinieri and the Swiss Border Guards, who had each barely glanced at Fermi's and Berg's passports before waving them through. It was hard to believe there was a war on.

Berg smiled a bit and allowed himself a moment's satisfaction. Here they were, all three with beer steins in front of them and Scherrer smoking a cigarette, calm and serene as they could be, looking out over Lake Maggiore with Lucarno visible in the distance across the lake. Blue skies and sunshine; a light, cool breeze off the lake to cut the summer heat as the three men—two of them among the world's finest physicists and one a mediocre baseball player—discussed how to save the world.

They were the only patrons at the little café, and the owner, who was the waiter and also the cook, had brought them their beer and gone back in to make their sandwiches, so they felt free to talk almost openly.

"Thank you both for coming. I know it was a difficult journey. But I have news of a certain opportunity."

"Something involving Heisenberg?" Moe asked. The information must be good or Scherrer wouldn't have gone to so much trouble.

"Yes, my old friend, Werner. He's being allowed to visit with us in a few months."

"You're joking," said Fermi. "Germany would never allow such a thing. Hitler himself would have to know and he would never allow Werner to travel."

"I thought so myself, Enrico, for the longest time. But then one of my students, a brilliant young woman, of all things, pointed out that we could play to Hitler's vanity. And so we concocted a seminar series and asked Werner to come be our first speaker at the ETH."

"And this worked?" Berg asked, incredulous.

Scherrer smiled. "I brought you something to see," he said as he took a final drag on his cigarette, stubbed it out in the clay ashtray, and reached into the front inside pocket of his jacket.

For a second, Berg thought Scherrer might be reaching for a weapon; but that was silly, they were all friends here, right? And, indeed, it was simply a letter, still in its envelope, though that had been opened.

Scherrer handed it to Berg, said, "Open it, my friend. It's from Werner Heisenberg." Berg pulled the cut top of the envelope wide and pulled out the letter. It was a letter, written in ink, in a very nice hand. In German, of course.

Berg read it aloud, in low tones, but loud enough that Fermi could hear.

"My dear Paul,

"I hope this finds you well, and safe and healthy, in your comfortable surroundings in Zurich.

"Life here is sometimes difficult, as you might imagine, with the war dragging on and the occasional worries over Allied bombing. We are safe enough here at the moment, away from anything that might be thought a worthy target of Mr. Churchill's or Mr. Truman's aircraft, but I do worry over the family's safety. We all must make our sacrifices for the Fatherland, but I would happily risk my own life to safeguard those of my wife and children. I am grateful that Herr Hitler has, twice now, allowed me to keep my family with me as we have moved our Uranverein facilities from place to place to find a secure facility where we can work.

"It is grueling work, as you must know, and demands a great deal of my thought and energy. But I have, from time to time, done some interesting maths to advance the S-matrix work and so I am delighted to report to you that not only do I have something interesting to say at your little gathering, but Herr Hitler has personally endorsed my speaking to your group in Zurich in December.

"So I thank you most deeply for the invitation and am happy to report that I shall be able to attend. I am looking forward to seeing you and all my old friends in Switzerland at the Eidgenossische Technische Hochscule where, I am sure, much interesting work has been done during these unfortunate times. I look forward to hearing from you and your colleagues and I hope that you will find what I have to say of some small interest.

"Elisabeth and the children were delighted to be invited but will be unable to attend. They do say hello and wish you and your family the best. Christine, especially, hopes to see your little Lisia sometime soon in a better, more peaceful world.

"I will see you in a few months, my friend, and I will look forward to that meeting with the greatest anticipation."

Berg looked up. "And he signs it, "Werner."

He sat back and looked at Fermi, who was shaking his head in disbelief, and then they both looked at Scherrer, who was smiling broadly.

"How did you do this, Paul?" Berg wanted to know. "Heisenberg? In Zurich? In the middle of a war? How did you even manage to contact him to make such a request?"

"Paul," Fermi added, leaning over the table, "You know Werner every bit as well as I do. You *must* know what this means. He *must* have intended the implications of this letter. Surely you agree?"

Scherrer's smile faded. "Yes, Enrico, of course. And so we must take advantage of this opportunity, as Werner no doubt would wish us to do."

"Take advantage?" asked Berg. "He's got a target on his back, gentlemen, and it's been there since the start of the war. You think he means to offer himself up at this get-together you have planned? Why would he do such a thing?"

"To tell us, to make it clear to us, that Germany does not have the super-bomb and will not build it. That could be Werner's motive," said Fermi. He leaned forward, his hands open, expressive. "Spero che sia così." I hope it is so.

Berg nodded. "Yes, that might be it." There was a rumbling in the distance, the low sound of engines, several of them working in unison, slowly drawing closer. "That would make sense if he's doing what you two think he is doing, finding ways to stall the creation of that super-bomb, pushing the development of it in the wrong direction."

The rumbling grew closer, the vibrations from it rattling the crockery on the table,

the plates vibrating, the silverware jiggling in place. A tank column coming down the road? That's what it sounded like.

The proprietor, Gianluca, came out and looked up, pointed. "Once a day lately, four in the afternoon, like clockwork."

They looked up and a bulbous nose appeared over the hill behind them and then grew to include the entire zeppelin, flying low, an enormous thing, a giant when seen this close. It was the *Hindenburg*.

Safely interned in neutral Switzerland and renamed the *Wilhelm Tell*, she was still the pride of the German people, the mighty airship that had found safety here on the very day the Americans and English declared war on Germany.

It was an enormous airship. Berg knew the basics; it was capable of carrying a payload of half-a-million pounds, double that if one wanted to risk the dangers of using hydrogen instead of helium. It was more than eight hundred feet long, had a cruising speed of seventy-five miles per hour, and a range of an incredible ten thousand miles. Beginning in 1936 it made regular two-day crossings of the Atlantic between Frankfurt and New York, less than half the time the best ocean liners could manage and in greater comfort.

He wasn't surprised to see her flying so low. The *Hindenburg* was known for flying just a few hundred feet up. It made for a great view for the passengers and impressed the hell out of those on the ground as they watched the huge thing go by with its giant swastikas on the side and on the tail.

Or at least that's how it had been for her before the war. Since she'd been interned in neutral Switzerland, she no longer carried the Nazi banner. Now she was flying with giant red crosses on her, the deal with Hitler being that the Swiss would let her fly, and with her German crew, as long as the paint job was Swiss.

By god, she was really something. He gaped, along with Fermi and Scherrer, as she passed overhead and made her way across the lake toward Lucarno.

And then, once she was gone, the three men got down to making some plans for December in Zurich.

Before the afternoon ended and Moe and Enrico wandered back into the Italian Republic and picked up their bicycles, they had an idea of what to do. And, more importantly, how to do it.

### December 12, 1944

Paul Scherrer's home was a lakefront, two-story chalet, across the Seestrasse boulevard from Rieterpark, with its woods and playing fields. Berg had spent a couple of weeks with Scherrer and his family back in mid-October and came to very much like Ilse, Scherrer's wife and the real master of the house. He also liked the three children, all girls ranging from eight to fourteen. By the end of those two weeks he'd put the family onto his mental list of people he would have to save from Hitler's anger if push came to shove on this Heisenberg thing. Fermi and his family were already on the list so, with a deep internal smile, Berg was starting to think of the list as his Phavorite Physicists list.

Heisenberg was not a phavorite.

Moe walked up the long driveway. It was snowing hard now, an inch or two on the ground already and a lot more to come, looked like. There were half a dozen cars parked on the grass to the side, showing off Zurich's relative wealth even during this war. A couple of Bugattis and a Mercedes spoke to the presence of some local politicians and leading businessmen. Some lesser Renaults and Citroens probably belonged to younger professors still looking for tenure.

Berg was about to knock on the door when Jeanine, the eight-year-old, beat him to it. "Mr. Berg!" she said with delight, and came to him for a hug. She was the most de-

lightful of the three charming daughters, so, "How wonderful to see you, Jeanine," he said, hugging her back. "How are your sisters? And your mother?"

She laughed. "You're so silly, Mr. Berg. Amelie is fine, but she's the only sister I have and she's nearly eleven, so there's no talking with her, really. And Mother is fine, too. And Father. They're so happy you're here, and so am I!"

She prattled on a little longer, taking him by the hand and leading him into the house, presumably to meet the hosts before she would let go of him. Well, that was fine, but what was this thing about having just one sister? He knew, firmly, there were three. Was his memory wrong? He'd seen his father slip away into dementia and he didn't like considering the implications of these doubts about himself. Just nerves, perhaps, and that, he decided, he could handle.

Firmly in tow behind Jeanine, he rounded a corner and there was Paul Scherrer and beside him, Ilse. Hellos and handshakes and hugs and polite kisses on the cheek all around and soon Jeanine was back with her sister and the adults were talking, mostly about nothing but the weather and the children, since most topics of interest were off-limits in a group like this, where there was certainly a Gestapo agent or two in the crowd, along with several admitted Nazi sympathizers like Weiszsäcker.

"By the way, our mutual friend is here," was all Scherrer had to say after the small talk ended. "I do believe he's out in the back room, the one with the view of the lake."

Berg nodded, shook his friend's hand again, very knowingly, since they both knew it might be the last time they'd see each other, and then left the Scherrers and walked past the likes of Gregor Wentzel and Ernest Stuckelberg, nodding and saying hello but moving, moving toward the far room, the one with the view of the lake, the one with Heisenberg.

### August 23rd, 1943

Wild Bill Donovan was setting up a special kind of operation, a unit filled with people who would risk their lives for their country, working behind enemy lines, finding out things, causing trouble for the enemy.

What he had in mind for Moe Berg was work in Europe, dangerous work. He needed someone who could speak all those damn languages, someone with nerve, someone smart, someone with some physical skills and the willingness to do what had to be done. Was Moe Berg that man, Donovan wanted to know?

Sure he was. Sign me up, he said to Donovan after a half-hour conversation. And when do I start?

But it wasn't that simple. It would be best to finish the baseball season and then disappear into the woodwork, quietly, unobserved. Could Moe do that? Could he play ball for both the White Sox and his country? Could he finish things out in September and then go into training in October and, probably, be in action by the spring?

Sure he could. Sign me up, he said again to Donovan. And so it was.

But if the plan was to keep it quiet, Moe failed at that. Flush with his new calling, filled with self-confidence, the old Moe faded away into the rainy days of August and a new, bolder, Moe Berg was playing first base now for the Sox. A Moe who was hitting a ton, making the picks at first, running the bases like a madman. Freedom from worry was a wonderful thing and Moe tore the cover off the ball for the last five weeks of the season, hitting .342 and playing great defense. He led the White Sox in a climb from fourth place to third and then to second in the American League. Hell, still five games back at the end of the season but in that last month Moe Berg, baseball player, went from has-been to a hot item. Manager Jimmy Dykes professed loudly that he loved Moe's heart and his determination. General Manager Harry Grabiner praised Moe and swore he wouldn't trade him, and then attempted to make a deal with the Senators.

This was not exactly how Donovan wanted it to go, since it brought attention to Moe, but that was all right, in the off-season most people would forget baseball. There was, after all, a war going on. A hell of a war, what with Rommel revitalized in North Africa taking back Tobruk and knocking on the door of Cairo, and Germany launching those damn rockets at London, and the Luftwaffe's new jet aircraft regaining superiority over Europe. Things were teetering. There were a lot of people, important people, saying it was time for an armistice with Hitler so America could concentrate on the Japanese, where the war was going better since the cakewalk at Tinian.

Wild Bill was not interested in talking peace with Hitler. Wild Bill knew what most Americans didn't: the Nazis were working on a super-bomb, and with jets and rockets and those new, larger U-boats they had a way to deliver one if they got the damn bomb built. If that happened, the Japanese wouldn't matter, Oppy told him time and again. If the Germans got the bomb first, nothing mattered. The war was over and the good guys lost.

Moe Berg, spy, and the key to it all, really, found himself on the fast track.

### December 12, 1944

Moe got caught in two brief conversations as he worked his way toward the back room, but he had to stay quiet and unobtrusive, blend in, and so he chatted about S-matrix and then about the weather and then, finally, he got to the double-doors at the back of the chalet that opened up to the added-on back room. One of the doors was open and he walked through it and there, at the window at the back of the room, the window with the great view of Lake Zurich, was Werner Heisenberg, chatting with several people, smiling, nodding his head.

One of those people was a woman. Was *the* woman, Moe's mysterious friend from the past two years and the conversation from a couple of hours ago. It was her, he was sure of it, though she was dressed differently now, more elegant and less business, her hair piled up and a smart, little hat on top of that. There were long earrings and red lipstick and padded shoulders. Putting on the Ritz. Damn, she was a knockout.

He walked toward the little group. The woman saw him coming, smiled, looked at her watch. "Werner, dear, here is the man I was telling you about—the Italian physicist who worked with Fermi?—Mario Antonacci."

Then she turned to Moe, offered her hand. "So good to see you, Mario. I'm so happy you were able to come."

Heisenberg reached out to take Moe's hand in his own. "It is a great pleasure, Herr Professor. As you must know, I am a good friend and a great admirer of your colleague, Professor Fermi. I had hoped he might be able to attend this weekend."

"I was with him just a few weeks ago, Professor," Moe was able to say truthfully. "He had hoped to be present, but with the political situation as it is . . ." Moe shrugged.

Heisenberg nodded. "Of course, Professor. These are difficult times for us all."

Berg felt a hand on his shoulder, that flash of stomach-churning disorientation. It was the woman, and she was putting a hand on Heisenberg's shoulder, as well. "Boys," she said with a little laugh, "time enough for small talk later. Right now I was hoping to take the two of you outside." She took a look at her watch again. "I'm told we're going to see quite a sight in the next few minutes. A very special visit from an old friend of mine. Would you come with me, both of you, please?"

There was nothing to do but follow, as the woman took them both by the hand and walked toward the doors that led out to the back yard of the chalet, where a path led to a wooden walkway that, in turn, led out to a dock. No boats tied up this time of year, but no ice on the water yet, either.

The night was warm for December, well above freezing. They walked out onto the dock, the three of them, alone, the house behind them dimly lit, quiet, as the Scher-

rrers prepared for bed and the servants finished cleaning up the remnants of the small dinner party. A cloudless, moonless night and few wartime lights made for a beautiful sky, the Milky Way arching across in full glory, a reminder, in its own way, of the hell that was nighttime bombing. There was a distant rumble, a rhythmic beat to it, a deep cadence that Berg remembered from a few months ago. Engines. Big twelve-hundred horsepower Daimler-Benz diesels, four of them, sixteen-cylinder behemoths, driving the great beast forward. The *Hindenburg*. The *Wilhelm Tell*.

The great dark shadow of it emerged from the east, over the alpine ridges to the back of the lake. Low in the sky, as always, it seemed to take forever to finally clear the ridgeline and establish itself in its full glory.

It came toward them, slowing, slowing, and then, no more than one hundred feet above their heads, a huge thing nearly three football fields long, easing to a stop, the roar of the engines quieting to an idle. Directly above the three of them was the fuhrergondel, the control car, where the crew did its work. The passengers and the cargo were inside the envelope.

"She's magnificent, isn't she, Moe?" the woman asked. "I told you that you'd see her again."

"You never mentioned the *Hindenburg*," Moe said, and took his eyes off the huge shape above him and turned to look at the woman.

She was holding a gun. Moe's gun, the Beretta. He reached into his pocket and wasn't surprised to find it not there.

"You know this has to be, Mr. Berg," said Heisenberg, walking over to stand next to her, admitting he knew who Moe really was. "Tomorrow morning, at the Eagle's Nest, Herr Hitler and the others—Goering, Hess, Von Braun, Goebbels, Hausser, Messerschmitt, Ribbentrop, Himmler, and many more—will be gathered to meet with me as I return from Zurich aboard the *Hindenburg*.

"Hitler has an announcement. He plans to tell them that the super-bomb is ready, and that Messerschmitt has a plane that can deliver it. He plans to introduce me and I will explain how the bomb works, and the damage it will do to London, and how we are building three more of these super-bombs, these atomic bombs."

"So killing you now is too late. I get that," said Berg.

"No, Moe," the woman said. "In about five minutes they're going to lower a ladder down from that control car. We're going to help Herr Heisenberg get on that ladder and climb up to the control car. Then we're going to watch the *Hindenburg* leave, heading for the border, and then the Eagle's Nest."

"We're not going to stop him?"

Heisenberg shrugged. "No, I don't think so, Mr. Berg. There are no bombs made of the size the Fuhrer thinks they are. There is only one bomb—we have built that—and it's enormous. It weights nearly twenty of your tons, and it's twice the size of a train car. There is no way for a plane or a rocket to deliver such a weapon."

"It's already built?" Jesus, the game was over, then.

And then it dawned on Moe Berg, spy. The game was nearly over, yes, heading into the ninth. But if that bomb . . .

"That bomb is in the *Hindenburg*? It's in there right now?"

The woman and Heisenberg both nodded.

There was a creak from just above, and then a bang as a hatch slammed open and then was tied off. A ladder started inching down from that hatch. The great hulk of the zeppelin was only twenty feet above them now, surreal in its enormity, silver in the darkness, only the single flashlight coming from the control car illuminating the ladder, aluminum, as it cranked slowly down.

"And you're taking it to the Eagle's Nest?"

"Yes, Moe, he is. That's a crew of volunteers in there. The super-bomb is in the hold,

the gas cells filled with hydrogen for extra lift. Tomorrow, about noon, they will reach the Eagle's Nest and tie off at the landing tower. Professor Heisenberg will exit the zeppelin. Herr Hitler and the others will be at the landing pad to meet the creator of the great bomb and then they expect to board the *Hindenburg* and see more of the bombs, brought to them safely through neutral Switzerland."

"Instead . . ."

"Instead, the trigger will spring and the enriched uranium will reach critical mass, and this war will come to an end."

"My god."

The ladder touched down on the wooden dock. Werner Heisenberg took Moe Berg's hand to steady himself and then, with Berg's help, got his right foot onto the first rung of the ladder. Berg held the ladder steady and the woman came over to help. Their hands met on the ladder as Heisenberg started climbing and Moe felt that now familiar nausea, the moment of disorientation. He knew to take a look toward the house. The lights were back on, a crowd again visible through the curtains. Did anyone miss Heisenberg? Was there another Heisenberg in there? Was this Heisenberg still here?

Moe looked up and Heisenberg was already at the control car, hands reaching down to help him through the hatchway.

The woman was gone. Moe's Beretta was back in his pocket and he knew that here, now, it had never been taken.

Someone was shouting. Moe felt the ladder being yanked upward, out of his hands, up into the belly of the beast. That was all right. He was sure of it, he was dead certain that it was all right, what Heisenberg had in mind.

The shouts were closer, footsteps crunching through the few inches of snow that now covered the ground. The lake was frozen. It was very cold.

Two men were coming, running, one ahead of the other. The first was Weizsäcker, waving a Luger and shouting something in German about stopping, stop the zeppelin, you must stop the zeppelin. Behind him was Paul Scherrer, trying to catch up, yelling something himself: "Carl, don't shoot, do not shoot. The hydrogen! The hydrogen!"

So they knew, or at least Scherrer did. No surprise there. Moe reached into his pocket and pulled out the Beretta. Weizsäcker was a good thirty yards away. It would take a very lucky shot.

Weizsäcker stopped running and stood there, pulling a loaded magazine out of his coat pocket and fumbling with it as he loaded the Luger. There was an audible click as the magazine catch snapped into place.

Scherrer reached him, grabbed his arm, and Weizsäcker turned and shoved him away and then shot him, close range, no more than five feet away. Scherrer spun once and fell.

Moe Berg had taken a first in marksmanship in his training, though that was with the Colt .45. Still, he'd spent two days at Scherrer's house a couple of months ago, standing right near this dock in some other reality a long way from this one, target shooting with the Beretta so he could shoot and kill a Nazi. Okay, here was the chance. He took aim as Weizsäcker turned back around and fumbled with pulling the toggle joint in the rear of the Luger to bring a round into the chamber. That took two seconds and then he pointed the Luger at the *Hindenburg*.

And died there, a hole made by the bullet from Moe Berg's Beretta appearing above his left ear.

Moe walked over briskly, clouds of vapor from his suddenly heavy breathing wreathing him as he reached Weizsäcker, who had fallen to his knees but still seemed to be alive. This man had shot Paul Scherrer. Moe put the second shot into the back of the head and as Weizsäcker fell to his side and then rolled, dead, onto his back, Moe put one more shot, for good measure, into the Nazi's forehead.

And suddenly it was very quiet. Moe could hear the crunching of snow as someone else approached. He looked up and it was, of course, the woman. She knelt over Scherrer, who was moaning.

"The bullet went through the flesh of the forearm. Not much blood. He's very lucky," she said, "but I suppose his pitching career is over, right, Moe?"

Scherrer wasn't wearing a coat, it had all happened too fast for that. She tore away the long sleeve of his shirt to get a strip of cloth to tie around the wound.

"You're very funny," Moe said.

She rose to her feet. A number of people were coming, but they had a few seconds before help for Scherrer arrived. "You know, Moe, in some of the scenarios you never get to Europe."

"What?"

"Yes, it's true. Sometimes you're a ballplayer and sometimes you're a lawyer and sometimes you're living at home with your sister, alone, reading your newspapers, afraid of the world."

"Not afraid, really; that's not what it's about."

Behind him, the engines roared to life and the zeppelin moved out over the lake, toward Lucarno, and tomorrow to Berchtesgaden and by noon to doing something real, something that mattered.

"It's all very uncertain, Moe," she said, smiling. He shook his head. A moment like this and she's making Heisenberg jokes.

"Moe," she said, "There's a place where you're a catcher for the Senators."

"God forbid."

"But in all these places, all these myriad of possibilities, you're reachable. You move through the frames easily. And you always get the job done."

"You know, I'm not stupid . . ."

"Quite the contrary, Moe. Your intelligence, your languages, that and your ability to move through the frames; that's why we need you."

"But I have to admit I'm not real sure what's going on here."

The crowd from the party had reached them; people were kneeling over Scherrer, trying to help, and looking, fascinated and horrified, at the bloody mess that had been Carl Weizsäcker.

"Okay," Moe said, "I get it. Count me in."

She smiled at him, reached out to take him by the arm, and then, after the nausea, after the moment of dizziness, the two of them, Moe Berg and the woman, alone on the lakeshore, walked away into the quiet darkness of a strangely warm December night in Zurich. ○

Copyright © 2012 Rick Wilber

# Tachyons

Tachyons race  
backward and forward in time—  
maybe sideways, too.

Tachyon message  
I send to my younger self:  
kid, don't be so dumb.

A message from my future self!  
I'll ignore it.  
Old guys are boring.  
—Geoffrey A. Landis

Copyright © 2012 Geoffrey A. Landis

# GREENER

Josh Roseman

**Josh Roseman won *Dunesteef's* 2009 Broken Mirror Story Contest and his voice has been heard on *Pseudopod* and *StarShipSofa* podcasts, as well as *Escape Pod*, where he also writes articles and reviews. Josh is on Twitter @listener42, and his website is [roseplusman.com](http://roseplusman.com). His second story for *Asimov's* takes on a future where, while social mores have evolved all-too convincingly from our own, certain truths remain timeless.**

**T**he apartment is silent. Naomi and the kids are gone. Eight years—two contract renewals—and we decided to end things. Or, more accurately, I decided it was time to let the contract lapse.

I really thought Naomi would take it better, but I was wrong. I thought she would be able to overcome her old-fashioned upbringing, her parents with their lifetime contracts and their “for-better-or-for-worse” mentality, but when I told her I wouldn’t be renewing for another four years, she hit me. She actually punched me, so hard that I stumbled, falling onto the floor and cracking my head against the refrigerator.

I don’t think much was said after that. I slept on the sofa, and when I got to work the next day, my message telltale was blinking. I found a simple, terse note from her on my screen: “I’m bringing the kids to my parents. I’ll get my stuff out next week. My attorney will contact you about custody arrangements.”

A few lines below that: “You prick.”

That was three weeks ago.

Sari steps in behind me and the door slides shut behind us. Her hands go to my shoulders, then slide down my arms. I turn to her, see her dark face half-lit by the city lights coming through the open window. Her eyes are wide. She’s smiling. I lean in to kiss her, but she stops me, puts one finger on my chest. “No, Scott,” she says in her lilting accent. “You must test first.”

I roll my eyes—I don’t think she can see it, not with the light behind me—and step into the kitchen. The junk drawer—Naomi called it that—is mostly tidy now, just a couple of data drives and the small white box. I set it on the counter and open the top; blue lights flicker as it cycles up, and an oval area glows yellow. “I’ll go first,” I say, pressing my index finger to the yellow light. There’s a tiny pinch and a beep; the machine has a drop of my blood. While the small square readout shows a pattern of pretty lights, I take out an alcohol swab and run it over the testing pad. I’m sure I’m clean, and I’m just as sure that Sari’s not going to want to test if I haven’t cleaned up after myself.

Another beep. We both look down at the readout, Sari close enough that I can smell the delicate citrus scent of her perfume, feel her bare arm brush the sleeve of my shirt. In small capital letters, it says, “NO KNOWN SOCIALLY-TRANSMITTED DISEASES.

NO KNOWN CONTAGIOUS PATHOGENS. BIOCONTROL IMPLANT ACTIVE THROUGH 121778. THANK YOU FOR USING PFIZER." Despite knowing I'm clear, I still let out a soft breath. I must have touched at least twenty people in passing between leaving the bar and getting to the apartment; who knows what I could have picked up?

"Very good," Sari says. She reaches past me and presses her index finger to the yellow oval. Her hand brushes mine as she does, and I'm sure it's intentional. The machine thinks, taking longer than it did with me, and the readout is a little more ambiguous. "NO KNOWN SOCIALLY-TRANSMITTED DISEASES. NO KNOWN CONTAGIOUS PATHOGENS. ANTIGENS PRESENT FOR INFLUENZA STRAIN 602-A. NO DANGER OF INFECTION. BIOCONTROL IMPLANT ACTIVE THROUGH 030579. THANK YOU FOR USING PFIZER."

"602-A?" I ask. "What does that mean?"

I see Sari's shrug; my eyes have adjusted to the lack of light. "I was ill a month ago," she tells me. "I received medication, and did not miss any time at work. I was told 602-A causes at best a tendency to sneeze when it reacts with vaccinations." She smiles and touches my arm, fingers gentle through my shirt. "My test is clear. Your test is clear."

Her message is clear. I put my arms around her, hands on her lower back, above her hips, and this time I do kiss her.

Even though we're both clean, Sari insists that I fabricate a physical barrier. It's been ten years since I've been with anyone except Naomi, and I've almost forgotten how to put it on. Sari waits patiently, slim and dark, a smooth statue reclining in our bed—my bed now; Naomi didn't take it, or any of our furniture, with her—and smiling. I finally get it in place and kneel between her legs, then lean forward, but again that finger on my chest. "What is it?" I ask, impatient.

"You must obtain my consent." She says it with a smile, and I'm sure she won't say no, but she's right. She has to explicitly voice her consent or this could be considered forced. "And I must obtain yours."

I try to laugh, but it comes out tight and uncomfortable. "I consent to sexual relations with you, Sari Kadam."

Her hands come up to my face, cool on my cheeks. Her thumbs stroke my cheekbones. "I consent to sexual relations with you, Scott Everett."

Sex with Sari, though, is a disaster. It's been so long since I've been physical with anyone except Naomi that I can't satisfy Sari. Not even a little. When it's over, she gathers her clothes and walks out of the apartment.

Naomi would never walk out after sex, no matter how bad it was.

But maybe it was just Sari. At least, that's what I hope. So I try again. Neither Ann nor Kelly asks me to wear a barrier, though both want me to test—and both are clean. It doesn't work out with either of them, though—Ann turns out to be a mistake, desperate and clinging, and Kelly makes it clear she just wants me for the night. After that, I'm jaded to the whole thing, though I go out with Bryan and Daniel after work on Friday anyway. We get a few drinks before Bryan suggests a negotiable-entertainment venue. I don't really want to go in, definitely don't want to pay fifty dollars just to walk through the door, but he promises there's someone I'll want to meet.

Her name is Tina. She's very nice—she ought to be, since I have to pay her just to sit and talk with me. She's wearing too much perfume. And, like every other employee, male or female, that's all she's wearing; places like this, the management wants it clear to everyone what they're negotiating on. When I was younger, I might have been distracted, but Naomi preferred nudity when it was just the two of us and, after getting the requisite look, I find it easier to ignore the fact that Tina is naked.

"If you're so unhappy about being here," Tina says in a flat, broad Midwestern drawl, "why'd you come?"

I shrug. "Bryan said I'd like you."

Tina grins. "Bryan's a pervert. Pay me enough and I'll tell you just what it is he likes about me."

"I'm fine, thanks," I say, making a face. She laughs—it's a prettier sound than her voice—and scoots closer to me. Her hand falls to my right thigh, as if by accident. "So, how did you—" I pause. My comm is vibrating in my pocket; I take it out, and Naomi's picture is on the screen. I'd caught her mid-laugh, carefree, beautiful. "Sorry, Tina. I have to take this."

She nods and as I get up it's as if she shuts down, going from affable, available girl to some sort of switched-off machinery. I touch the connect key and hold the comm to my ear. "Hi, Naomi," I say.

"Just making sure you'll be at the apartment tomorrow when I drop off the kids." The old sharpness is back in her voice, and despite the picture on my comm, I remember why I didn't renew the contract.

"I'll be there," I say. "I'm just out for drinks."

She makes a sniffing noise. "Not my business," she says. "I'll drop them off at nine, like we agreed."

Naomi clicks off before I can say goodbye. I plop back onto the bench and Tina comes alive again, pressing up against me. Her arm goes around my shoulders. "Everything okay?"

I nod, just once. "Former wife," I tell her. "Every time we talk, she's just so . . ." I make a hard, unpleasant sound and Tina smiles. "What's so funny?"

She strokes my cheek. I know the gesture is practiced and professional, but it still feels good. Reassuring. "There's no need to keep it all in," she says. "We can talk about it, and about what you want to do to make it go away."

"What?"

Tina reaches out to the table in front of us and touches a pale-blue oval with her forefinger. A screen—part of the table, but so dark I didn't notice it before now—lights up, and a menu appears. "Let me help you," she says, her voice soft. "I can take her off your mind. I promise."

We test at the venue—I come back clean, but Tina has antigens for herpes simplex. Hell, half the country has that; at least Tina's had it treated. She meets me outside, gets into my car wearing jeans and a sleeveless blue blouse. As I drive her back to my apartment, I notice just how blond her hair is, how curly it is. But plenty of women have curly, blond hair.

I offer her coffee when we get inside, but she declines. "Let me take you to bed," she says, coming close, looking up at me with pale blue eyes. "Let me help you forget about her."

"Naomi."

"Naomi," she repeats. I let her take my hand, let her lead me to the bedroom. She undresses me expertly and guides me to sit on the edge of the bed. Her clothes come off just as quickly, and soon enough she's on top of me, doing exactly what we negotiated. It feels amazing, but not like when Naomi did it. I can wrap my hands in Tina's hair, hear her tiny gasps and high-pitched moans, but I can't let go. I try, but I can't, and I know it's because she's not Naomi.

Suddenly Tina is clutching my shoulders, and I bury my face in the bend of her neck. Her skin on my lips doesn't taste like Naomi's; she's bitter, sharper. Later, when I'm on top of her, her body is so much like Naomi's: it shines the same in the bedroom light and arches the same at the moment she cries out, but I can't lose myself inside her.

She's not Naomi.

Before Tina can get dressed, I negotiate with her to stay the night and be with me again in the morning. I fabricate a toothbrush for her and we use the side-by-side sinks in the bathroom, both naked, just like Naomi and I used to do before bed each night. I can't stop myself and, as Tina rinses her mouth, I come up behind her and hug her, burying my face in her hair. I almost don't care that it smells different; if I try hard enough, I almost believe I can catch the scent that is uniquely Naomi.

But I can't. Not really.

We go back to the bedroom and snuggle together under the comforter, and before I realize who I'm with, I'm kissing Tina tenderly on her lips, wishing her good night. She smiles at my embarrassment, but she's being paid enough not to say anything.

Tina and I are having breakfast when the door chime rings. I open it and am nearly taken off my feet when Cher and Bobby barrel into me, hugging me as hard as they can. I extricate myself enough to get to my knees so I can hug them properly. "Hi," I say, kissing their cheeks. "I missed you."

"Missed you too, Daddy," Cher says. She's older—nine—and thinks she should speak for Bobby, who's only six. "Can we live here again?"

"Can't," Bobby says. "Mom said."

I look past them. Naomi's standing in the doorway. She has a faraway look in her eyes and I realize that she can see into the kitchen. She can see Tina.

"Hey, go on into the entertainment room," I tell them. "Let me talk to Mom for a minute."

"Okay," Cher says. She looks back at Naomi. "Bye, Mom!"

Naomi just keeps looking at Tina. I get up and guide Naomi into the hall, letting the door close behind us.

She punches me again. My teeth clack together and I bump the wall, but this time as she comes in for a second blow I catch her fist. We were together so long that she can't help telegraphing what's coming next, and I take her knee on the side of my thigh. It puts her off-balance and she staggers back a bit. "You prick," she snaps. "If you wanted me, why didn't you stay with me?"

I blink back tears; my jaw is throbbing fiercely. "You drove me crazy, Naomi," I say softly. I think I taste blood, and I swallow. "I loved you—I do love you—but you drove me crazy! Nothing I ever did was good enough for you, and you never let anything pass without fighting me on it. How can you expect me to renew with you after that?"

"How can you . . . That woman . . ." She's almost sputtering, her pale cheeks going bright red with anger, and I can't help it; I grab her and push her up against the wall, press my mouth to hers, kiss her hard, the way we always used to.

She kisses me back for a moment, then shoves me away and smears her mouth against her sleeve. "Damn it, Scott! How do I know you're clean? How do I know that she didn't give you something?"

"We tested," I say, but the look on Naomi's face tells me any answer would've been a wrong one. "Damn it, Naomi, we're not under contract anymore! I'm free to do what I want!"

Naomi folds her arms under her breasts. "Then why pick a woman who looks so much like me?"

I don't have an answer for that, and we just stare at each other for a minute before Naomi lets out a long sigh. "Take them to school Monday. I'll pick them up there."

She turns to go. But I can't let her. "Naomi," I say. "Wait. Please."

She stops walking but doesn't turn around.

"Naomi, I'm sorry. I miss you. I just . . . I mean, I can't . . ."

"I'll see you in a month, Scott," she says, still facing away. I watch her walk down the corridor, turn the corner to the elevator, and I have no choice but to go back inside.

The kids and I have a fun day together. I suppose I'm overcompensating, but I let them decide what to do and end up spending five straight hours at the theater. There are worse things than animated animals and robots running around, doing silly things, and anyway it makes them laugh. Then we get dinner and go up to the skywalk—something Naomi never lets them do, despite how safe it is.

And even though it's perfectly safe, I let Cher hold my hand, so tightly that it makes my fingers hurt. Bobby doesn't care; he's going from left to right, looking out over the city. The skywalk is ten stories up, connecting the Bank of America building with the Faneuil Hall Marketplace; the sun goes down early this time of year, and the city lights are bright all around us. Halfway across the bridge there's a little sitting area with a couple of metal-mesh tables and benches, all bolted down. Cher and I sit down, and I give Bobby my card so he can use the pay-to-view binoculars. Cher is still holding my hand, but her grip's loosened a bit.

"We didn't have to come," I say after a minute. "If you don't like heights, I mean—"

"No," she says quickly. "I mean, yes, I don't, but it's only fair. Bobby sat through my princess movie."

I don't let her see my smile, and I don't tell her that he was playing *Tom Brady Football* on my comm the whole time. "I guess you're right," I tell her. But I know my kids, and I know that's not what's really on her mind. I also know that I can wait her out.

It doesn't take that long. "Daddy, why didn't you and Mom stay together?"

I have a pat answer ready; I've had one for each of them since it happened. But it seems stupid now. All my reasons, all my excuses, and none of it feels right. "I wish I knew," I say. "I love your mom. I still love your mom." I swallow hard; there's an unexpected lump in my throat. "And I miss her, and I miss you guys. But we just . . . it wasn't working, Cher. It just wasn't."

"Did you stop having sex?"

I cough loudly, inadvertently pulling my hand away from Cher's. "What?"

She makes a face. "Come on, Daddy, it's just what adults do when they love each other. You and Mom love each other, so if you stopped having sex, maybe you don't love each other anymore." Her voice is resolute, but the skin around her eyes is tight and she's folded her hands in her lap.

I put my arm around Cher's shoulders and pull her close. "We . . . didn't stop having sex." I can't believe I'm talking about this with my nine-year-old daughter. "Cher, if there was anything wrong with your mom and me, it wasn't that."

"So what was it?" She's looking up at me now, eyes glistening. A tear is halfway down her left cheek, and I brush it away. "Why can't you be together?"

I don't have an answer, and even if I wanted to think of one, Bobby's bounding back, still full of energy, my card in his hand. Cher pushes away, as if I was hugging her and she didn't want me to, and gets up. I take my card back from Bobby. "Ice cream?"

"Sure!"

"Great. We can get it when we get off the T." I hold out my hand to Cher, but she doesn't take it; I shrug and start to walk, Cher a step ahead and just out of reach, Bobby still zipping back and forth, seeing as much as he can. At the Marketplace, we take the elevator down; both Bobby and Cher look out the transparent windows, but all I can remember is the last time I was in this elevator, Naomi and me bundled in coats and scarves but still pressed together, kissing, not caring who was watching.

As good as tonight is with the kids, that night was so much better.

I miss those nights. I miss her.

\*\*\*

I have to carry Bobby into his room; Cher just needs a gentle touch on the shoulder to be woken up and urged to go to hers. I make a halfhearted attempt to clean up the living room—popcorn dropped on the couch and the floor, wet rings of condensation on the coffee table—but stop when I find Cher's comm sticking out of her jacket pocket. The telltale is glowing purple: a video message. It's probably an invasion of privacy, even though she's my daughter, but I play it anyway, just out of curiosity.

Naomi's face appears on the screen and I suddenly can't stand up anymore. I half-drop-half-fall onto the couch, holding the little screen in front of me.

"Hi, baby. Just wanted to wish you good night, and sweet dreams, and to tell you I love you." Her voice is tender, soft and sweet, the way it is whenever she has to put a bandage on a cut or explain why bad things sometimes happen. My chest gets tight again. "I hope you're having a good time with your dad, and that you're behaving, and taking care of your little brother." She's smiling, but there's tension around her lips and in her neck. She runs one hand through her thick hair. "I miss you, baby. I can't wait to see you Monday." A pause, just this side of too long. "Love you, Cher. Call me if you need anything. Anything," she repeats.

The video stops on the last frame—Naomi's face—and the menu comes up. I select "keep as new" and tuck the comm back into Cher's jacket pocket, but it's only two minutes later that I've got it in my hand and am listening to Naomi say "I miss you, baby."

This time, I forward the message to my own comm before putting Cher's away. Then I get up and take my comm into my bedroom, securing the door behind me. I undress and climb into bed—it still smells like sex and Tina's perfume—and hold the comm in front of my face.

"Hi, baby," Naomi's recorded voice says. "Just wanted to wish you good night . . ."

After I drop the kids off at school Monday, I call in sick to work and, as I ride the T back to the stop near my apartment, I send a message to Tina. She responds almost immediately and, an hour later, we're on the couch in my living room, her bare feet in my lap, a news channel running on the screen, the sound off. "I missed this," I say.

"I imagine so." She moves her heel a little, but I don't respond the way I think she expected me to. "What's the matter, Scott?"

I sigh and lean my head back on the couch cushions, my eyes closing. "I've just been lonely, I guess. I mean, I've been out a few times, and even had sex, but it's not the same."

"Scott," she says softly, slowly, "what exactly am I doing here?"

My hand closes around her right ankle. "I just . . ." I find myself sniffing. "I miss you. I want you back with me."

She yanks her foot away and I open my eyes to see her getting up from the couch. "I think that's quite enough," she tells me. She pulls her comm out of her pocket and does something to it. I hear mine ping softly. "There. That's everything you paid me today."

"But . . ."

"No buts," she says. I stand up, but she's already almost to my front door. "Scott, I'm not your ex-wife." Her tone is not ungentle. "I might look a little like her, but I'm not. If you want her back, you have to talk to her, not to me."

I shake my head slightly. Tina's right; she doesn't look like Naomi. Not really. "All right, fine. Go."

I turn away, but I don't hear the door open. I feel Tina's hand touch my shoulder and I turn around. She cups my cheek and smiles. "You're a good person, Scott. I'm sure the two of you can work things out."

"I hope so." It's more a whisper than anything else.

Tina steps away, her touch lingering long after she's gone from the apartment. I can still feel it as I pull out my comm and watch the message from Naomi, the mes-

sage I edited down at midnight, once I had the content memorized. As I listen, it almost feels like Naomi had just said goodbye for the day.

“Hi, baby. Just wanted to tell you I love you.”

“I love you too,” I say. “I really do.”

I watch the message, over and over, for most of the day. On Tuesday, I go in to work, but everyone in the office notices that something’s up. “What about Tina?” Bryan asks as we sit in the break room, nursing coffee. “Wasn’t she great?”

“She was fine,” I say, noncommittal. “Nice girl.”

“Did she do that thing?” His left eyebrow goes up and he makes a gesture that can’t be misinterpreted. “I told her she should, that you really needed it.”

I don’t answer.

“Fine. At least I tried.”

He leaves the break room, mug in hand. I’ve been cupping my own in both palms, ignoring the heat seeping through the ceramic and into my skin. I spend the rest of the day at my desk, skipping lunch, earpiece tuned to my comm, listening to Naomi’s message. Every chance I get, I load up pictures of her and flip through them on my screen. For every harsh word, there’s Naomi, wind whipping her hair into a curly mess, sitting on the seawall at Martha’s Vineyard. For every snide remark, there’s Naomi, smiling longingly at the camera, chin resting on a hammock made of her fingers. For every pointless argument that she insisted on winning, there’s Naomi, nude and beautiful, posing for me in our bed.

For everything she did to hurt me, she did just as much to make me love her.

How could I ever have said goodbye to this woman?

I’m still at my desk at seven, long after everyone else has gone home. I put my comm into the dock on my desk and select the Medfield address that connects me to Naomi’s parents. Her mother—the same face, the same hair but done in gray-streaked brown—answers my call, folding her arms. “What is it, Scott?”

“Hello, Joanna,” I say. “Is Naomi available?”

“Even if she was, I don’t think she wants to talk to you.”

“Fine, but I still want to talk to her. Can you . . .” I trail off. Something Naomi’s mother said sinks in. “Why wouldn’t she be available? It’s a school night. What about Bobby and Cher?”

“They’re fine,” Joanna says. “Their grandfather is helping them with their homework.”

“That’s good.” Naomi’s father is a biologist, one of the smartest people I know. “Where’s Naomi?”

Joanna’s lips press together tightly, and she exhales slowly through her nose. I stare intently at the screen, and finally Joanna tells me. “She’s gone out. A date.”

I feel my fingers go cold, a fist clenching around my heart. “A . . . a date?” Joanna nods. “With whom?”

“She didn’t say. And it’s none of my business. Or yours,” she adds. “Or don’t you remember that you didn’t renew the contract? The one you insisted on, instead of marriage? When you said no, you gave up the right to ask after Naomi.”

Joanna’s finger comes close to the screen, to disconnect me.

“Wait,” I say, my voice dull. “Please.”

Her hand moves away. I’m thankful; Naomi’s father wouldn’t have waited. “What is it?”

“I . . .” My mouth is suddenly dry. I swallow hard, run my tongue over my teeth, and try again. “I made a mistake.” The sound of the words, the trembling near-whisper, the first time I actually say it out loud, it all runs together and I find myself cry-

ing. I choke back a sob. "I should have renewed, Joanna." I have to force the words out. "I miss Naomi. I miss the kids. I . . . just . . ." I manage to take a couple of breaths. "Please, Joanna. If I call her, she won't answer. Can you help me? I just want to talk to her."

Joanna's silent for a long moment. "I know you have her comm address. For the kids." She appears to make a decision. "Here." Both hands move toward the video pickup and I hear the soft clicking of keys. My comm pings a second later. "Her emergency code."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me," Joanna says quickly. "She's furious with you." A long pause, as if she's not sure what she wants to say next. "But you're better as a family." Her expression is more sad than anything else. "Fix this, Scott, and don't screw it up next time. I won't help you again." She stabs her finger at the screen; her face blinks out, replaced by a call summary. I touch the keys on the dock and bring up my messages.

There it is. Naomi's emergency code. They can be bypassed, but Naomi's not that technical.

I am. Instead of calling her, though, I type the code into AC&C's locator program. Her location comes up less than ten seconds later, along with a map and directions. I don't need either.

I was just there.

The skywalk.

I pass my card over the reader and step through the little plastic turnstile at the Faneuil end of the skywalk. A group of what looks like college students holds the elevator for me; when we get to the top, they stroll out and I angle around them. According to my comm, which has been tracking Naomi's location since I left the office, she's at the midpoint of the skywalk. Maybe she's even sitting at the same table where Cher and I sat a few nights ago. I zip up my jacket and begin walking, wondering how I'm going to explain to Naomi's date why I tracked her down.

Turns out that's not even necessary; Naomi's standing at the railing, looking outward. There's a gentle breeze; her curly hair flutters a little, as does the tail of her shirt where it peeks out from below a dark-green cashmere sweater. I stand next to her. "Hi, Naomi."

She turns her head. Her face is hard, her eyes sharp. "What are you doing here, Scott?"

"I thought you were on a date," I say.

"That's not an answer!" she snaps. But she immediately seems to regret it; I know that expression. "He invited me to his apartment, but when I told him I wasn't planning to sleep with him, he got pissed off and left."

"I'm sorry."

"No, you're not." She actually half-smiles. "But then, you had that woman in the house when I dropped off the kids." The smile's frozen on her face as she realizes what she said. "Did you sleep with her?"

Well, there's no right answer here. Best not to lie. "Yes," I say. There's regret in my voice that I didn't expect. "I . . . I was lonely, and we negotiated."

Naomi makes a face. "That's disgusting."

I shake my head. "I shouldn't have, but we tested first. We were clear." I try to keep any inflection out of my words, but I know I sound a little bitter. "It's been almost a month. I haven't been alone since we moved in together. I was lonely, Naomi. And I missed you."

"I could tell." Her hand is cold when she puts it over mine. "Scott, what happened to us? We used to be so happy."

I look at her; her pale eyes are shiny. "I don't know, Naomi, but I know this: I'm not ever going to be happy again unless I'm with you."

She laughs, that incredulous sound that means she doesn't know how to react, and then she's grabbing me, hugging me tighter than she ever has, almost knocking me off-balance as she pulls my head down and kisses me like she did when I proposed the contract. My arms go around her and I squeeze her right back until she coughs into my mouth and I realize I'm holding on too tightly.

"Come on," she says, her chin trembling. "Take me home."

We hold hands all the way to the elevator, and once inside, she presses against me like she did that night in the elevator all those months ago. I put my arms around her waist and pull her close.

"Hold on," Naomi says between kisses. I've pulled her sweater off and shoved up her blouse to get to her bare stomach. But her hand is on my shoulder. "Scott, wait!"

I bury my face in her stomach, breathing in the scent of her, heart pounding. "What is it?"

"I have to . . ." she swallows, but doesn't continue, just pulls away and goes into the kitchen; I follow, shrugging off my jacket and tossing it on a chair. She goes straight to the junk drawer and takes out the tester, and the pounding in my chest stops for a few seconds. I can only watch, dumbfounded, as she opens the little white box and powers it up, then presses her left middle finger to the yellow oval.

We wait. It beeps. She reads the screen, which I can't see.

And the color in her cheeks drains away.

"Naomi?" I sound small. Scared.

She passes the tester to me, and I can tell she couldn't speak if she wanted to.

"DRHIV TYPE-TWO MARKERS DETECTED. PLEASE CONTACT YOUR PERSONAL HEALTH REPRESENTATIVE IMMEDIATELY. BIOCONTROL IMPLANT ACTIVE THROUGH 052880. THANK YOU FOR USING PFIZER."

I put it down on the counter. "Naomi? What . . . how did this happen?"

There are tears in her eyes again. This time she can't stop them. She reaches for me, but I step back; she stumbles and catches herself on the edge of the counter, going to her knees. Her hands readjust her clothes, seemingly without thinking about it. "It was the night after I left," she says softly, not looking up. "A couple of friends tried to cheer me up. We got really, really drunk."

"Oh, Naomi . . ." She doesn't drink. She barely touched her champagne at our contracting ceremony. I kneel, but stay out of reach. "Naomi, what happened to you?"

Now she tilts her chin up. Tear tracks shine on her pale, perfect face. "This guy, he was nice to me. He listened. He said he'd drive me home, and I left. I guess I forgot about Maria and Gwen, because they gave it to me good at work the next day, even though I was hung over."

"Naomi," I say, "what aren't you telling me?"

She buries her face in her hands and starts to sob, and I can't help it anymore; I go to her, put my arm around her shoulders, and let her cry against me. "Naomi, I don't care what it was. I'm not mad. I just . . . I have to know!"

She's muffled, but I still understand her. "I told him I wanted to test, but he said he was clean, and he already had his hand under my dress and I didn't push it. God, Scott, I didn't make him do it! And now look at me!"

I grab her shoulders suddenly, and she stares at me, shocked. "I am, Naomi," I say. "This isn't the end of the world. We just . . . we need to get you treated. Use barriers. We . . . we can . . ."

But I can't finish. I break down. We kneel together on the kitchen floor, and we cry.

\* \* \*

Naomi and I both call in sick to work on Wednesday and I take her to our PHR. He does more extensive testing and it turns out the markers are left over from where her body fought the virus to a standstill. "Your vaccine," he tells us, sitting on a stool in the exam room. "It protected you from the effects of the disease, just like it's supposed to. You'll be fine, Naomi, but drug-resistant HIV is still dangerous to others."

"Wh . . . what does that mean?" She's holding my hand; I feel her pulse racing. "I . . . what about Scott? My kids?"

He shakes his head slightly. "You'll never be able to donate blood or tissue, and if you ever cut yourself, you need to make sure no one touches the blood, just in case. We'll need to give Cher and Bobby extra boosters, but they should be all right."

Naomi sighs, relieved, but there's something missing. I stare at the man until he gets up and leans against the counter. "I'm sorry, Scott. We can protect your kids, because they share your wife's DNA, but the two of you aren't blood relations."

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"You can't have unprotected sex with Naomi. If you do, you're likely to contract the disease yourself."

I blink slowly, then nod. HIV was beaten for a few years, back in the tens, but it came back, overcame the treatments and the vaccines. Scientists managed to stave it off and create a new vaccine about thirty years ago, but while I was in college it mutated, and the new version is tougher than ever.

How could Naomi let herself catch this?

I turn to her, anger hot in the pit of my stomach, but then I see her face, her tears, her absolute misery, and it melts away. I just got her back, and now she needs me more than ever.

At first, we manage. After the initial shock wears off, everything is perfect. We manage to avoid arguments for a couple of months just by staying out of each other's way. But that's not a perfect solution, and half a year later we're at each other's throats again, same as always, and Cher and Bobby are in their rooms to escape my shouting and Naomi's deadly quiet words.

It's not the first time I wonder if I made a mistake in reuniting with Naomi, but it's the first time I say it out loud. "I should've left you then," I snarl, pacing back and forth in the kitchen. "I should've told you to get the hell out of my house."

"Maybe so," she says, barely audible, just like every other time we fight. "But you'd be a mess."

"Oh, screw you!"

"Maybe," she says again. "But I know you, Scott. And I know me. We can't live without each other, so let's just get over this . . ." She falters, and I fight the urge to finish her sentence—something that would fuel the fire even more. "Damn it, Scott, what the hell were we even fighting about?"

I turn away without a word and walk quietly down the hall to our bedroom. The door closes behind me. I want to scream, to kick something, to go back out there and remind Naomi, in explicit detail, exactly what she said that set this off.

But I don't. I just stand there in the center of the room, eyes closed, forcing myself to calm down. This has to stop.

Naomi comes in an hour later, touching the lock control as she does. "The kids are okay," she tells me as she undresses. I'm already in bed, comm in hand, reading. "Bobby's fine, but Cher . . ." She takes a deep breath. "Scott, Cher was bawling. She was afraid we'd separate again." I open my mouth, but she holds up a hand. "I told

her it wouldn't happen, no matter what, and I put her to bed, but you're going to have to talk to her."

"I will," I promise.

Naomi pulls her nightgown over her head and slides into bed beside me. "Scott," she says, "we have to stop this. It's not healthy."

I put the comm on my nightstand and turn to her. "I know, Naomi. I really do. But . . ." Oh, hell, I have to tell her. "Naomi, you push every single one of my buttons. You drive me crazy. You piss me off at every turn, and it's all I can do to scream at you instead of going off and breaking something."

"So why do you stay?" Her eyes shine. "We don't have a contract anymore; you can leave whenever you like."

"Because I love you!" I reach for Naomi, and my hand finds her thigh. I sound plaintive, pleading with her to understand. "I love you, and I want us to be together!"

Naomi smiles. I move my hand to her cheek; her face is as soft as ever. "I love you too, Scott." She holds me by the wrist, kisses my palm. I feel tears on my fingers. "I never said it before," she says, "but I'm sorry."

I shake my head. "It happened. It's in the past." I move closer to her, my lips nearly touching hers. "Be with me, Naomi. Now. Forever."

She nods and kisses me. When we separate, her cheeks are pink, her lips parted. She reaches for the barriers on the bedside table, but I grab her arm. "No."

"Scott, you know what the PHR said—"

"I don't care anymore." I nudge her legs apart with my knee. "I want you, Naomi." I'm close enough now to feel her heat. "All of you. No matter what."

She wrenches out of my grip and pushes at my chest. "I can't let you, Scott. I can't infect you!"

I take her wrists in my hands; her pulse is bird-quick under my thumbs. "I love you, Naomi." She tries to protest, but I kiss her and, after a few seconds, she stops fighting. I have to prove to Naomi that I want her, and only her, for the rest of my life. I don't care about the disease anymore. I can live with it, but I can't live without Naomi. I've tried, but the grass isn't any greener on that side.

After the kiss, Naomi doesn't try to stop me again. Her back arches, just like always, but a tear trails down the side of her face. She doesn't have to tell me why she's crying.

And I don't have to ask. ○

Copyright © 2012 Josh Roseman

# NEXT ISSUE

## JUNE ISSUE

You'll find our June issue suffused with alien life. Whether they are **Megan Arkenberg's** horrifying home wreckers who would just as soon eat us as help us pass a "Final Exam" or **Will McIntosh's** alarming "Possible Monsters" who may help an aimless young man discover life's potential, these unknowable creatures help shine light on some of the most intractable aspects of the human condition.

## ALSO IN JUNE

The award for the strangest aliens may go to **Bruce McAllister's** "Free Range" paean to the counterculture; **Bud Sparhawk's** merciless Shardies could leave you with more questions than answers, yet very glad you aren't "The Scout"; no aliens, just a bewildering old woman and her "Widdershin's Clock" are on hand in **Kali Wallace's** *Asimov*'s debut, but in his own *Asimov*'s debut, **Mercurio D. Rivera's** "Missionaries" encounter the imponderable other; **Jack McDevitt** hints at extraterrestrials in his poignant tale about who or what might be left "Waiting at the Altar"; and a group of young people who depend on aliens for assistance piloting the vast reaches of deep space discover these beings can't do much to alleviate teenage angst in **Alan DeNiro's** heartfelt look at "The Flowering Ape."

## OUR EXCITING FEATURES

**Robert Silverberg's** June Reflections provides us with insights on "Rereading Philip K. Dick"; **Paul DiFilippo's** On Books reviews single author collections; and **James Patrick Kelly's** On the Net celebrates the "Encyclopedic"; plus we'll have an array of poetry and other features you're sure to enjoy. Look for our June issue on sale at newsstands on April 3, 2012. Or subscribe to *Asimov's*—in paper format or in downloadable varieties—by visiting us online at [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com). We're also available individually or by subscription on [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com)'s Kindle and Kindle Fire, [BarnesandNoble.com](http://BarnesandNoble.com)'s Nook, [ebookstore.sony.com](http://ebookstore.sony.com)'s eReader and from [Zinio.com](http://Zinio.com)!

## COMING SOON

new stories by **Felicity Shoulders, Robert Reed, Steven Utley, Kit Reed, Ekaterina Sedia, Michael Blumlein, Will Ludwigsen, Bruce McAllister, Benjamin Crowell, Matthew Johnson, James Van Pelt, Megan Lindholm, Allen M. Steele**, and many others!

The awesome Carol Emshwiller has won two Nebula Awards for short fiction and a World Fantasy Award for best collection, as well as the World Fantasy Award for Life Achievement. Last year, Carol celebrated her ninetieth birthday and won an Asimov's Readers' Award for her short story, "The Lovely Ugly" (August 2010). In her new tale, a man who is not particularly contemplative or introspective discovers some truths about himself and his world while . . .

# RIDING RED TED AND BREATHING FIRE

Carol Emshwiller

*ADVICE TO THE RIDERS OF THE HUMPBACKED HEIGHTHWRICKS*  
General Goba Niri

*Sit well forward, your inner thigh in the hollow between their front leg and their stomach. This is the steadiest seat from which to wield your weapons should that be your purpose.*

*Place the bit well behind the teeth and facing the lower jaw. It's the lower jaw that's the most sensitive, so this will obtain the most obedience.*

*One of their wings is always pinioned. There's no use having a flying heighthwrick. Even with you on their back, they'd escape to their home peaks. Don't try to see if they can fly by pushing them off a cliff. They'll die from the fall.*

*It is impossible to tell if a heighthwrick is male or female until an egg is laid. The eggs will be infertile unless a male is present.*

*They can use their dewclaws as a real thumb. We recommend they be removed.*

*Never wear clothes that rustle or shine. The heighthwricks will shy.*

*They're utterly silent because of their lack of a voice box.*

*If you keep the head tight in its harness and the mouth clamped closed, you can spend the night under one of the wings. There you'll be safe from all dangerous beasts.*

*You may think I repeat myself needlessly as I say again, never wear anything that sparkles or squeaks, but it cannot be repeated too often.*

*As with all beasts, mount from the left side. Though we seldom wear swords any longer than is still the side from which they're trained to be mounted.*

**M**y beast has had the dewclaws recently removed. The scars still look raw and painful.

The book said: *If simple enough, they can learn their own names.* I named him Ted.

I poke a stick into his cage to see how he'll react. (I'll call him "he" until I find out otherwise.) I wish the beast could roar instead of sigh that breathy sigh. He rears. He leaps. What a magnificent creature! That iridescent makes him hard to see. As he reared I couldn't tell his head from his wing.

I poke him again. Again he leaps and glitters. Again he breathes that long breath out. He may not have a voice box, but he sounds dangerous even so.

I throw in the haunch of a ruminant. In spite of those rows of teeth, he swallows it whole, in one gulp. I can see the lump of it passing down his neck.

*Heighthwicks can go for miles at a trot, but at their fastest only in short bursts. At an out and out run, they'll pump their useless wings out of habit, or perhaps out of hope. That doesn't help their speed. In fact, it slows them down. The rider will not be able to tolerate that kind of bouncing for long.*

We'll see. I'm in better shape even than most other military men.

Also we'll see just how far and fast he can gallop.

They said I should practice with my beast before setting out, but I'm an athlete in peak form, as all soldiers should always be. Also, they want me to be in Tanarara by day after tomorrow.

This whole place is new to me—a land of rocky towers and deep canyons with rivers at their bottoms, interspersed with long sections of desert. It's red and tan and black. Until I came here I'd never seen the like, nor had I ever seen creatures like these heighthwicks.

They hired me from across the three seas. I'm from a green land full of scurrying furry creatures and bugs (I don't miss the bugs), a land of little streams instead of rushing rivers, of rolling hills, no cliffs. Heighthwicks wouldn't thrive in our damp land. General Niri writes that: *Heighthwicks need the climate of the high desert. They get dragon fleas and wing rot in damper lands.*

When I arrive, I'll wear my medals although my rank alone should serve to astonish.

Next morning Ted sighs as I wake him with a poke. That's a deep-in-his-throat sigh lasting several seconds. I'll take that as a roar. *As to the wake up poke, in the withers is best, and it needs to be hard or the beast won't notice.*

I say, "Rise and shine," and shine he does. The sun's not yet up, but I have to put on my sunshades.

He's already been saddled and strapped, and the cage, folded now, is attached behind the saddle—well back so as not to interfere with me.

I climb the several steps of the mounting block, launch myself across to the saddle, sit, heels down, legs in the dip between the forelimbs and the stomach. I don't worry about sitting straight-backed, I always sit that way.

We hurry to cross the plain before the sun is high and the desert heat begins. I'm glad to see Ted has a fast trot and even a good brisk walk. General Niri wrote that that walk would be unusual. Perhaps Ted is as anxious as I am to leave the capital. I've never been a lover of cities. We're two of a kind.

Soon after sunrise, I stop and remove my uniform. I cover my shoulders with a loose white shirt. The military cap of my rank is a fairly good sunshade.

When the sun is hot and high, we finally come to the first canyon. From the cliff edge, the river below shines like a mirror. It'll be nice and cool in the canyon and the water will be cold.

Had they not pinioned Ted's wing, he'd have leaped across the canyon in a few seconds. Instead, we start down the zigzag path into the shade. It's instantly cold. Ted keeps at a nice jog. He's not sure-footed. When he stumbles he balances himself with his wings, which causes him to stagger. By the time we finally reach the river I'm, I must confess, a bit—more than a bit—motion sick. I slide down his flanks, glad to dismount. Side by side, we lean and drink. I feel a fellowship. I can't help smiling up at him, but I remember the book of instructions: *They can seem friendly and then suddenly strike.*

Yet one forms a bond in spite of one's self, spending all day together hot and tired. But I suppose the bond is one-sided. The general wrote: *It's dangerous to think you're making friends.*

It is scary leaning so close to that mouth full of teeth. I'd be hardly two bites for him, but he was fed before we left and won't be hungry for another month.

We rest until I feel less nauseous, and then I move Ted to where the bank is steepest, place him under it, climb it, and then drop down into the saddle. (There's a light-weight rope ladder attached to the saddle in case I need to use that, but I want to learn to mount without it. With all the other beasts I've ridden, there's a mane or fur to hang on to, but scales are slippery.)

Ted leaps across the river, wings spread as if they were of some use. Then we trot up the other side. There's one more desert and one more canyon to go before we get to Tanarara.

Tanarara is a canyon village. It straddles the river. They say water runs directly through its lower street, and washes away the dirt. They say there is no cleaner, cooler place. It is walled by blocking off the canyon above it and below it. They say there's an iron gate.

By the time we near the Tanarara canyon, I've had to stop three times and dismount to throw up. I wish I'd brought something for the sickness.

Ted wanted to eat the vomit, but I managed to keep him from it. *If you use the bridle to twist the neck sideways as far as it will go, and hook the bridle to the saddle horn for a few minutes, the animal will become amenable.*

I didn't have to do that. I started to but he wised up right away. Evidently they had already done that to him. I suppose it's easier to do when they're young, and ever after they're frightened by it. They don't realize they've grown strong enough to resist.

I want to take time to recover a bit before entering the village. I'm afraid I'll look as pale and sick as I feel.

I slow Ted to his nice clipped walk. I don't get sick at that pace. At the edge of the Tanarara canyon I don't dip down into it near the town. We trot east several miles and find a place just under the rim where we'll spend the night. We drink from our pack of stale warm water and look down at the cool river below. Though there's not much expression in Ted's big heavy face, I *think* I can see in his look the same longing for that cold water that he must see in mine.

I'd be happy to live in this barren land forever if I could have one of these beasts for the rest of my life. This one comes with the job. When I stop the job or they stop me, Ted will have to go. I could never afford such a creature.

In every way, this job suits me. I like the hardships and the dangers. I like cliffs. I like that I need to keep in military shape. I think I can be fierce enough to keep the job for a long time.

Even now, tired as I am, I'll do my exercises. After riding all day they're all the more necessary.

I've pulled Ted's neck in and down for the night and closed his mouth by tipping the bit up. Now he watches my odd movements. There's no expression on his face

that I can read. His ears are so small there's no way to interpret them. The tail is quiet. I try to see into his eyes. They are empty. Impossible to know if he's accepting of his ropes and the bit.

*It is said that, in the old language of this area, heighthwrick means from high in the rocks or, on the other hand, cave dwellers, but I have always thought it means untamable. Why would such a creature ever consent to be tamed?*

In the morning I trim my beard, dress in my uniform, pin on my medals. I check that the cage is still securely fastened. This time I use the ladder to mount. (We lose a few scales. I'm tempted to dismount and save them, but we'd probably lose even more if I did.) Then we climb back up into the desert for the ride to the town. Of course my uniform is wrinkled and sweaty before we hardly go a yard. By the time we dip into Tanarara Canyon again I might as well not have bothered dressing and washing and trimming. At least my medals shine. At least Ted shines.

The road to the town, though it has to go back and forth as much as any in the canyons, is smooth and wide. Ted can trot at a nice downhill clip.

Then the gates are before us. The river rushes under them. We stop and I dismount. We lean and drink again. We can't help it. The water splashes up around us. Now my uniform is damp, not only with stale sweat but also cold water. Now the knees of my white pants are dirty.

Do I mount and then call at the gate? Or do I walk over and pull the chain that rings the chimes?

Before I can decide, the gates swing back by themselves. I see right away that Ted won't fit through. Those useless wings make him too wide. I'm going to have to go in alone and looking a mess. Nothing to be done about it.

I tie Ted the usual way (head pulled down, mouth braced shut). I unfold the cage and again make sure it's firmly fastened.

Do I finally see a kind of smile on lips that can't smile? Or am I judging him, yet again, by my own feelings? But I would be proud if I thought like a dragon. All the better for what I'm sent to do.

I straighten my cap. (It's the only thing I have that's worth straightening.) I limp through the gates. (I'm still stiff from all that riding.)

There's no one there. Is this a clever ploy to keep me from my obligation?

But somebody opened the gates.

The street beyond rises steeply, as it must, to follow the shape of the canyon. The road is wide, but not wide enough for Ted. You can hear the river roaring underneath. I suppose you can hear that rushing sound all through the town.

I walk up the street a bit. Like they said, the town is clean—the cleanest I've ever seen. I'm the biggest mess in it. Even with my medals and my military cap, I'm afraid I may be taken for one of the unimportant people.

There are carved stone benches on both sides of the road. I think it best to sit and wait. They opened the gate; probably they'll come to me.

I get out the official document with the gold seal of the capital, demanding the tithe. It's reassuring to think that no unworthy person would have such a document.

I move down into the sun so that the gold seal glitters. I polish my medals on my sleeve so they'll glitter, too. I'm sure I'm being watched and I presume there's some sort of weapon trained on me. Perhaps many weapons. A lesser man than I might be frightened.

Actually, I feel calm. It's a relief to be sitting quietly for a change.

A longhaired boy appears on the street above me. He walks slowly down. He's dressed in a tunic and loose trousers. He's all in white, as am I.

No, it's a woman.

This has got to be a trick. I make sure my dagger is in place, ready to drop down from my sleeve.

There's something shiny at her neck. As she nears I see she's wearing a chain with a dragon scale as the pendant. I hadn't realized dragon scales could be used as jewelry. I wonder what the value is of those I left behind this morning.

She actually sits down on the bench right next to me. I think: How dare she? My cap shows my rank. Can't she see my medals? To have a dragon at all ought to be enough to show who I am. I think to say, *Back up*, and call her *Madam* in irony. But I'm dazzled by the dragon's scale. Odd how just one is almost as impressive as the whole animal. When it's just one you can concentrate on the reds and pinks that change to green and blue as the woman moves. I find it hard to look at her face.

She says, "I'm in charge here."

I do look up. She does have a strong look about her. She means what she says. Even so, I say, "I don't believe it."

"No need for you to believe it."

That sparkling dragon's scale is distracting. I suppose that's on purpose. I try to ignore it and look into her dark eyes. She's sitting much too close.

There's determination on her face. I can see that she deserves this job, perhaps almost as much as I deserve mine, but I will do my job no matter what.

In her own way she's not bad looking. Her hair (in its own way) is almost as lustrous as Ted's scales. It's dark with reddish tints. But I'm never swayed by looks. Besides, I like a more aristocratic face. Hers, unfortunately, shows her genealogy. And anyway, right now, all my admiration is for Ted.

She may have one scale, but I have thousands. I should ask her how much she paid for that. I may be riding on a fortune. I wonder if Ted would mind if I pulled out several. I wonder if only loose ones fall out by themselves. I wonder how hard I'll have to pull. I wonder if it'll hurt him.

I spent several days at the capital before getting Ted and leaving for Tanarara and yet had not seen dragon scales used as jewels.

I say, "How much did you pay for that dragon scale?"

"Nothing."

Of course she's lying. Or perhaps she earned it in a sinful way. She's handsome enough for that. Or was a few years ago. She has good teeth. Country people usually don't. Or perhaps she comes from a long line of sinful women with plenty of money for good food and jewels.

I say, "I've been hired to bring back the tithe."

"You call it a tithe!"

And then all of a sudden . . . I don't know how I know, but I know. I say, "Not possible. You!"

"I'm the tithe."

"You won't do and you know it."

"We have no other."

"I don't believe it. Let me see the others. I was sent here to choose. And only from those with *blue* eyes."

"You'll find no others."

I don't trust her. I don't want her riding behind me even if it's in a cage. And I suppose she'll be wearing that scale. What will Ted do? *Do not wear anything that glitters or shines.*

"I need for someone to sign the document. It can't be you."

"It has to be me."

"I must see your pedigree."

It's just as well I know nothing of this job and nothing of this place. Was that the

reason they hired me from across the seas? Have others tried and failed? Have they been dazzled by dragon scales? Have they fallen in love and never come back? But I'm a man of my word. I'm not like other men.

"I have it here," and she unrolls a document that not only has a gold seal, but a long blue ribbon. At the top there's a name: Mattia. It gives her age as twenty-five. The legal upper limit for the tithe. A tithe must be able to bear children for at least four years. I don't think she's that young.

"Where did you steal this?"

Perhaps she deserves to be the tithe from cleverness and know-how. I respect that.

"And what will you do with the memorable men of the capital?"

On the other hand, why should I care? I can say I was suspicious but had no way of finding any other tithe. I can say the document looked real. I had no reason to doubt, though she did look too old. I can say I'm not a good judge of women. That I thought perhaps the weather in the canyon was hard on the skin.

"Where is everybody?"

"You have no need to see any of the others."

The way she says it, I have another suspicion. I'll not put up with this ruse any longer. Close behind me there's the door of one of the houses. It's ajar and I see movement behind it. I stand up very slowly and stretch. (I'm well aware that that's undignified.) Then I leap over the back of the bench and enter that door.

The woman is right behind me. She must have jumped the bench as nimbly as I.

After sitting in the sun, I can't see anything for a minute. Then I see there are three women standing bravely there, all young and all strikingly beautiful. For sure I was supposed to pick from one of these.

Mattia (if that's her real name—which I doubt) holds my arm but doesn't pull me away.

The more my eyes adjust to the dim light, the more beautiful the women become. There's even one with quite an aristocratic look about her.

"And in the other houses?"

"More of the same. But only I am this year's tithe."

I let my dagger slip down from my sleeve, and at the same time lash out with one leg and trip her. Except I hold back. I tear her tunic half way down the front but I don't even scratch her.

Of course the other women turn on me. Before I know it I'm on the floor on my back. I don't hit out, as I would have if they were men. In fact I rather enjoy the scuffle . . . and make the most of it. (I pull that aristocratic-looking one into a hug. I hold her pressed against me for several seconds.) I let them take my dagger. I don't feel vulnerable without it, there's another in my boot.

Two of them sit on me to hold me down. I don't mind that at all.

The aristocratic one won't look at me. She gets the ropes and ties me up, as the others hold me. She blushes the whole time.

She isn't very good at tying. She's too nervous. I can wriggle out of her knots whenever I need to.

They bring me outside, back to the stone bench. More beautiful women come out of other doors. Is the town nothing but women? A tithe of the most beautiful would be more than would fit in the tithe cage. And it's odd; most of them are blond with blue eyes.

Mattia says, "So this time they sent one military man with a dragon instead of three sailors with dunk carts."

That's evidently a joke. They all laugh, and then they're silent. It's so quiet for so long I think of Ted, and I remember: *Heighthwicks should not be left too long tied and inactive during daylight hours. They are intelligent creatures and need stimulation.*

*tion. When they become restless, they will find ways to amuse themselves. They can do damage to their surroundings.*

(I think again how I deserve this beast. How we're two of a kind.)

I'm enjoying myself looking at all these women, picking out the most aristocratic, but I'm thinking if I have to use that other dagger, this time I'll not spare them. They're quick and clever, and somehow they've taken over the village. I must fight with everything I have.

I see now why I've been chosen specifically for this job. It's because of how capable I am, but is it also that I'm not a handsome man? That I'm rather short? That none of the women could fall in love with me? But the men of the capital knew of my reputation. I should be proud. I keep my dignity. I sit, at attention. My cap is lost somewhere but my medals still shine.

Mattia says, "Strip him and take away all the other weapons hidden on his body."

I pull out of my bindings, but they jump me just as I'm leaning to get my other dagger. I don't hold back, but there are too many and they've been trained to fight. I end up naked. Even barefoot.

They lock me in a tiny room with a little barred window in the door. I can see a bit of another room where a woman stands guard, but not in a military fashion. She sits, leaning back against the wall, and plays a small squeeze instrument. It makes a humming sort of music that reminds me of Ted's breathy hissing.

Most men would be discouraged, but I'm confident I can find a way out of this mess.

I don't suppose I can count on Ted for any help, except, tied down tightly as he is, he may become restless. I think again of what General Niri wrote: *We have no chains or ropes that can hold them. They can break through any bonds when they really want to, though most never realize their own strength. You must see to it that they never find out.*

Just as you'd expect from a bunch of women, the mattress is soft and the blankets warm. There's even a pillow. When they push a supper in through the door flap under the little window, the food is the best I've had—ever.

When I wake the next morning, after a good sleep, I lie quietly and listen. There's just the sound of the river.

Breakfast appears. Again, food as appetizing as the women. Still, this is unsettling. Here, even the lesser women are beautiful, even the one who pushes in the breakfast. Actually she looks quite aristocratic. Or perhaps nobody is less or better than anybody else here. How do they keep track of the worthy?

After breakfast I do my exercises. (You don't need weights to do weight lifting.)

Then four women come and escort me to a basement room just over the river. Some of the water flows up to a heater and then down to a small pool. And there, next to the pool, is my uniform. It's been washed and pressed and the medals polished. And here's even my cap. I could escape by way of the river, but why would I?

As I'm about to bathe there's some great crashes. They shake the building. Some of the water sloshes out of the pool. This land is prone to earthquakes, but it could be Ted. I hope it is.

Things quiet down but I hear the women running around and shouting. I, on the other hand, remain calm. I bathe and dress, check myself in the mirror by the door. I look as good as when I first started out, though I suspect I won't stay that way for long.

Nobody guards me anymore. I find my way to the central square. There's a lot of damage to the gates. Ted for sure. Even the stone pillars at the sides are damaged.

But where is he? Then I catch a glimpse of his sparkle just beyond the ruined gates.

The women are clearing away the broken gates so they can use the road. I stride

down with military bearing. That is, I try to. The road is full of debris. I don't achieve the look I'm aiming for.

As I reach the gates I see that that the glimmer beyond is the shine of the rushing water, not Ted.

The women don't seem to care that I'm leaving. They smile and wave. I feel I'm their joke. Even so, at the far side, I stand and salute them. They salute me back, laughing. All right, so I'm your joke. If they think being a joke hurts somebody like me, they're mistaken.

I hold myself back from running, finally free. I march up the road at a dignified and military pace.

I climb back and forth for several switchbacks, round yet another corner, when there is Ted in all his dazzle.

Now this is strange. His mouth is still bound partly shut, but even so he grabs me by the back of my uniform, carries me, sets me down a half hour later at the top of the canyon. I'm covered with saliva, my uniform is in shreds, but I feel a great elation . . . rescued by a heighthwrack! Has that ever happened to anyone but me?

At the top, I take off my gummy torn uniform. It's disgusting. My cap fell off long ago. It's dangerous in the desert without a good hat and something to protect your shoulders. I make something for my head out of the uniform.

I turn to mount. As I reach my seat, I see, in the dazzle of his scales, that the tithe cage isn't empty. The door hangs open. Mattia is there. She says, "Sit down. We're heading west."

I'm not going to stoop to ask why.

But I'm disappointed. I had thought Ted rescued me all by himself. Now I suppose Mattia did it. Though why would she? Why does she need me?

She shows me how to arrange the sleeves to hold my uniform over my head and shoulders. I can't look very dignified with this on my head.

Maybe I'll get rid of her on the way, sneak back to the village for a more aristocratic tithe.

I turn us west. Or I think I do. Then I see that she controls Ted from inside the cage by flashing that scale into his eyes.

Should I lock the cage? I guess not yet.

When it's about to be the hottest part of the day, we come to the next canyon—a much smaller one—and dip into its shade. We descend to the river. It's not like the one in Tanarara, more a trickle, and mostly mud, but there's enough clean water for us to drink. There are bleached bones scattered here and there. I see what could be part of a human skull.

We sit on the bank and eat Mattia's picnic. Again, the food is the best I've ever had.

Odd, how comfortable we—all three of us—are, resting here together. Ted looming over us, that lizard smile of his. . . . It's hard for me to believe he isn't friendly.

I take off the mess on my head. I lie back and look at the sky above the canyon. We've been silent all this time. A comfortable silence. I'm thinking how Mattia isn't bad looking. In fact, after all those striking women, her face is a relief. And it's friendly. Though I wonder if I'm her prisoner or she mine, and why did she lead me to this desolate canyon?

She says, "Heighthwricks always want to go home."

I say, "Most creatures do."

"Except you don't."

"I like it here. It's rugged and difficult. I prefer desert brown and rocks and cliffs to temperate green and rolling hills. Besides, where I come from we have no heighthwricks."

“Your heighthwrick is different. She carried you up herself. I didn’t think she’d want to, and I didn’t know she could with her mouth half closed.”

“She! How do you know?”

“I suspected, and then she laid an egg. Didn’t you hear her crowing?”

“Crowng!”

“Too bad you missed it. She was so happy she broke our gate. Just three swishes of her tail. We put the egg next to a stove.”

I’m so stunned I can’t say anything. Ted? Theodora?

“It would be worth a lot to us to have not only her, but another one like her. We’d be safe from the tithe.”

“It can’t be fertile.”

“That doesn’t matter to us.”

Can I guess from this, something about a village mostly full of blond and blue-eyed beautiful women?

“Last year we sent the men back without their carts and cages, tied to their dunks. Let free, your heighthwrick would go home to the cliffs, but the dunks head straight for the barn. We weren’t expecting someone like you with a heighthwrick. It makes us proud and confident. If they feel the need to send a colonel with a dragon, they must be worried.”

We lie, and watch the empty sky, silent again.

Then she says, “And if we had a military man to ride her.”

Do I have a choice? “You’ve never been a tithe.”

“Of course not, but . . .”

“And you’re not one of . . .” How to say it?

“Of course not.”

“And you can control heighthwricks.”

“Wearing a scale helps. But yours is different. Unlike most, she’s imprinted on you. They usually don’t imprint on anybody.”

*Some are more malleable than others.*

I hope what she says is true, but it could be a ruse. I suppose she has my daggers and I can’t even guess what other weapons. I should have locked the cage a long time ago. But she’ll have to think fast to best me.

She’s lying right next to me. She could stab me in a second, but I’ll get to her first. I roll over and on top of her, pin her wrists above her head with one hand and frisk her with the other.

I was right; she has one of my daggers.

Ted—Theodora?—moves so close I can feel her hot breath as if she really could breath fire. She watches.

I stay as I am, looking into Mattia’s eyes. She’s not frightened even though I’m holding the dagger to her throat.

“And you brought me to this out of the way canyon full of bones to kill me and keep my beast. Is this where the village men ended up?”

“We haven’t needed men for generations. All we want to do is stop the tithe.”

That seems reasonable.

“If we had a dragon and if we had you, we could stop it.”

I roll away.

“You could stay. I know you want to. You love this land. You love this beast. This is the first time you’ve ever felt at home. And you deserve this creature. You’re two of a kind.”

Can she read my mind? Has it been as if written on my face? Has everything else been written on my face?

And I like her, whatever her genealogy. All of a sudden I feel ashamed.

I throw the dagger as far as I can, up onto the steepest part of the cliffs and where they're crumbling and unstable. Where even one such as I could never climb to retrieve it.

The town is the cleanest, the food the best. I have a new uniform even grander than before, and a new and grander hat though I seldom wear either one. Usually I lounge in the square, or even more often, just outside the gates with Theodora. When the new Theodora is hatched, they're going to let her fly. They're going to let her keep her dew-claws. They're going to do everything the opposite of what General Goba Niri said to do.

The women like me. I'm like an odd uncle. "Uncle Colonel." I'm getting soft and fat but so is Theodora. We're still two of a kind.

Now, when other heighthwricks come, mounted by other officers, they take one look at me with my golden epaulettes, riding my Theodora, and leave. ○

Copyright © 2012 Carol Emshwiller

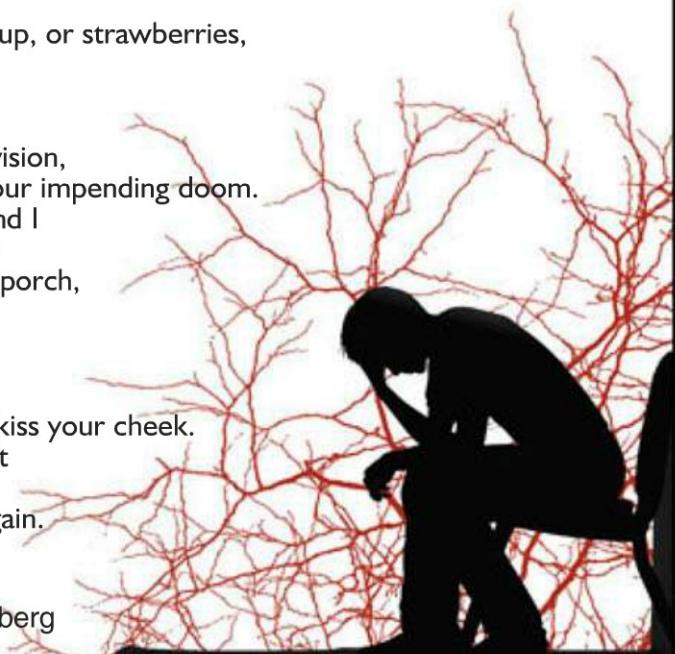
## Apocalyptic Love Song

The sun went out two hours ago  
and I would care, except  
your crumpled sweater is gone from my bedroom floor  
and my pillow still smells of your shampoo.

I hoped it would not end like this,  
that I at least would learn today  
if you preferred waffles with syrup, or strawberries,  
or drank your coffee black.  
I would not have kept you long.  
Breakfast, a shower, perhaps  
an hour or two of morning television,  
though interrupted by news of our impending doom.  
And then you could go home, and I  
would spend the rest of the day  
watching the dead sky from my porch,  
coffee in hand.

I do not object to dying alone.  
But I do wish you had waited  
for me to wake, and smile, and kiss your cheek.  
Unknowing, or uncaring, you left  
before dawn, before we knew  
that dawn would never come again.  
—Megan Arkenberg

Copyright © 2012 Megan Arkenberg



# LIVING IN THE EIGHTIES

David Ira Cleary

**David Ira Cleary tells us, “I live with my wife in Oakland, on a hill with a view. By day I write documentation for a well-known utility company; by night I write science fiction. I’ve recently assembled a collection of linked steampunk short stories, most of which appeared in *Interzone* and *SF Age*, which I am shopping around to publishers.” He wrote his new story “to exorcise some ghosts, as well as to give myself the excuse to listen to a lot of old and obscure music, under the guise of research.”**

**T**he old rocker, Clayton, was excited that day he met me at Traxx. “This website, Bob,” he said to me, shaking the snow off his black beret, sitting down beside me at the bar, “it’s a time travel site. Time travel!”

“Yeah?” I said. “A forum? *Back to the Future* memorabilia?”

“No! Fuck you! I’m talking the real deal. Not a site *about* time travel. A site *for* it.”

I looked at us in the mirror behind the bar: he gray ponytailed, leather-jacketed, silver earringed; and me, balding head shaved, little brown spectacles, little brown goatee like every third man of my generation. You wouldn’t know just looking at me that my mind was twenty years out of date. I peeled the label off my Michelob. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I’ll have an Anchor Steam,” he told Jodi, the barkeep.

We watched her butt as she drew the beer. I said, “I thought you weren’t supposed to drink with diabetes.”

“I thought you weren’t supposed to drink with anti-depressants!” he said. When Jodi had brought him his beer, he said, “We’re celebrating, anyway. What I mean is I’ve found a site you can use to time-travel.”

“A time-machine website.” I said something sarcastic about a contraption out of H. G. Wells, Victorian brass and vacuum tubes, with spinning analog dials that showed you year and month and day. All rendered in JavaScript.

“It’s nothing like that,” Clayton said. “There’s all the pages of theory. Stuff about the forty hertz binding cycle of consciousness, and how it’s that cycle that creates the illusion of time.”

“Oh. Time’s an illusion.”

“Okay. The *perception* of time.” He took a swallow of beer. “Anyway, it’s the first part of the theory. And the second part of the theory is that you have to break the natural binding cycle, replace it with a different cycle. Depending on the frequency, that’s what time you’ll go to.” He stared at me challengingly, gray-blue eyes deepset, daring me to laugh at him. “I’m going to go to 2025.”

“I’ll go to 1986,” I said, formulaically.

"For the music," he said.

"Yeah, for the music."

Clayton wanted to go to 2025 so there would be a cure for diabetes.

On the back of my napkin, I sketched Clayton as mad scientist, crazy-haired and Harley-riding. "How'd you find this site?"

"Some guy with the handle of Ziggy Gellman. He sent me a link on one of the diabetes forums. Said he'd caught one of my shows."

Just then somebody put on a Bon Jovi song, "Wanted, Dead or Alive," and we laughed. We both liked Traxx—the bar—for the music, but hair metal was not our favorite genre. I drank more of my Michelob, he more Anchor Steam. We listened to the music, united in our contempt for it. Finally I said, "So it's all theory?"

"No. It's the complete deal. It's got this web portal you use to disrupt your forty-hertz cycle. Just a click and a little time looking at the portal, and you're gone."

"And you've tried it?"

"Well, no. I need somebody there with me. 'Cause things might go wrong, you know."

After only half a bottle, the beer had left me warm and comfortable. "What things?"

"The wrong disruption."

"What, that'll send you to the wrong year?"

"No, that'll put you in a coma."

I finished my beer. Bon Jovi finished and the Vapor's New Wave classic, "Turning Japanese," started. That seemed like a good omen, so I said, "Send me a link to the site."

"Will do."

It was then that Jodi came by to ask if I wanted another beer.

She wore a red T-shirt printed "Subpop Records" and I stared at her chest as though I could divine the answer to her question in her breasts. I said: "I can't believe they say you're forty. You're way too hot!"

It had to be the stare, not the statement, that made her face cloud up.

Clayton was right. I shouldn't drink.

One beer had left me already talking like a jerk.

Gretchen always said there was nothing shallower than two guys bonding over something as trivial as shared musical interests. Except maybe football teams. But our lives have soundtracks, the songs that played when we first had sex or first got drunk or first met our Deadhead roommate in the college dorm, and it is by these soundtracks that men can gauge the signal events of our histories. That's how I argued to her that men come to know one another.

Clayton and I had first met at a retro club called Skinny Tie. I was on the dance floor, drunk on Long Island Iced Teas, trying to ingratiate myself with three twenty-something girls in period costume (fingerless leather gloves, fishnet tops over black bras, velvet bows atop pageboy haircuts). Clayton was the bass player in the band, an eighties cover band called Hier Mode whose repertoire ranged from The Knack to Killing Joke to New Order. Indeed, they were playing a fine version of New Order's "Blue Monday," our generation's anthem to self-pity, and it was not the militaristic drums or the lead singer's competently gloomy vocals but Clayton's urgent bass line that drove the song along its despairing course.

The song ended the band's set, and, giving up on the trio who had studiously ignored me, I went toward Clayton. A ganja-reeking white guy in one of the big Rasta caps that make your head look like the monster from *Alien* was chatting with him, but the guy turned as soon as I reached Clayton. The man observed me with blood-shot eyes, but it was his gap-toothed smile, which seemed to suggest we shared some

affinity, which made me look away. Did I recognize him? Could I have seen him at the club some time before? But I mistakenly recognize too many people when I'm drunk.

I said to Clayton, "I dig your playing. Buy you a beer?"

"Nah, don't drink. I'd take a sugar-free Dr. Pepper." He didn't look at me; a woman, a dark-haired beauty wearing a Frankie Say Relax T-shirt, was approaching us. "In a highball glass."

While I waited in line, I watched Clayton talk to the girl. Ah, to be a rocker, even a middle-aged one with the crown of his head shiny-pink in the stage light. He'd take her home tonight, I estimated. In my state of drunken dispassion the thought made me warm, not envious.

But she turned away from him even as I was walking back with the Dr. Pepper. His deepset eyes watched her leave, then he thanked me for the soda and with a wry grin said, "'Blue Monday' used to pick up girls."

"You rocked, man."

"But I look like shit. Crow's feet and gray hair. No chick wants an old man."

"You're not old," I told him. He looked mid-fifties but I guessed he was younger. "Girls go for older guys all the time. Especially ones who have mastered a bass line."

"I did what I could for a mop-top song."

"Mop-top? As in the Beatles?"

"No," he growled. "The kind of song dudes with long floppy hair on top would listen to. Back in the eighties."

I got him now. I'd worn my hair like that in '87 and '88. When I had hair. "You don't like synthpop?"

"Dude, don't let the ponytail fool you. I've always been a punker."

I was editing a reality TV show called *Pickups*. Not the worst of the genre, but close. Three male contestants have a weekend on Majorca, their challenge being to seduce as many women as possible. Bonus points for virgins, unusual foreplay, and ménages à trois.

It's a network show, so nipples and genitals have to be fuzzed out, swear words beeped. More importantly, each episode had to be cut to twenty-two minutes. Today I was struggling with that: I had the episode down to twenty-four, but I couldn't easily see where I'd cut next. Already I'd cut so much dead space that the pacing felt off, people laughing too quickly as if nervous, exchanging barbs as fast as speed freaks. Some of the sex would have to go, or be accelerated, but before I could do that I would have to decide which of the sex scenes was the least erotic. Hard to do. It was all so dull. I had to put myself in the mindset of a horny and mildly retarded seventeen-year-old male. So instead of working, I watched backward, Rod G., the contestant, returning to the Esperanza Club with the British bank teller, Lucy, walking backward to their table, refilling their drinks, dancing, me all the while hoping that going backward, Lucy would better anticipate how Rod's charm would turn to savagery once they'd slept together, and decide to give him a brush-off when he tried to pick her up.

I'd reached the instant where she was holding a martini glass as if she might throw her drink at Rod's face, and it was then that my e-mail client chimed.

Clayton had sent me the link to the time-travel site.

I paused the video and clicked on the link.

The site was called [myfourthdimension.org](http://myfourthdimension.org). It was text-heavy, academic-looking, with no graphics at all. The tone was as dry as *Pickups* was sensational. Its claim was that the flicker of its screen when synchronized with special music would disrupt the "forty-hertz cycle binding the thalamus to the spatial-temporal structures in the parietal and occipital lobes." Then once disrupted, the screen would flicker and

music would play at a frequency "to impose an organization of the temporal sub-modules coincident with the date that the subject chooses."

The site waffled on whether the time travel thus experienced was merely a subjective psychological phenomenon or the real thing. Each position was supported by a set of scholarly articles.

I clicked the link called Time Travel Application.

There was a page where you forfeited your right to sue The Fourth Dimension, LLC; another page with paragraphs in bold red font warned that the software should not be used without others present, ideally with medical personnel standing by.

I clicked through those pages and came to a calendar.

*This is it?* I thought, as I pressed the mouse pointer on the left arrow and watched the months regress. I had played this fantasy game for years. Time travel by clicking. Magical thinking, wish fulfillment. Highlight the day you want and there you go. The calendar accelerated as I held the pointer down. I reached the nineties after a minute, the eighties after a few seconds more. I stopped in mid 1986, then looked around. I was still in my cubicle, still in the twenty-first century. I heard my manager, Stacey, dressing down one of the other editors.

Then I noticed there was a button onscreen that said: Initiate.

I clicked it.

The screen flickered. No, more than that. My *vision* flickered, as if there were a refresh problem with my eyes. I felt nausea. Stacey's voice seemed muted. Then I saw something. I could see *supporting structures*. The bones in my hand. The grid of aluminum struts that held the ceiling tiles. The steel beams that formed the walls. All the deep stuff, for the superficial layers were easy to escape, and soon I'd lose the hard things too—

"Bob, you okay?"

Stacey was shaking my shoulder.

"What? Was I gone?"

"I'd say." She looked at me with distaste, eyes hard, chin dimply. "It looked like you were in a trance. I kept saying your name but you wouldn't respond."

With a badly shaking hand, I switched the screen back to *Pickups*. "But I was still sitting here, right?"

She shook her head dismissively. "Why don't you take the rest of the day off, Bob?"

Stacey gave me money for a taxi—she didn't want me to drive home—but instead of a taxi I called Clayton and persuaded him to pick me up.

Clayton drove an '83 Ford Fiesta festooned with band bumper stickers: Husker Du, Agent Orange, Black Flag, and the standard (if dated) liberal sentiments: Impeach Bush, Free Tibet, etc. As we rode, he played an old punk band, Fugazi. It was a tape, of course; he viewed with suspicion any digital medium. "You dumb fuck. Trying it on your own."

It was snowing and the Fiesta's worn-out wiper blades scraped the windshield at a quarter beat to the Fugazi song.

"I didn't believe," I said.

"You could have died."

"Nothing happened."

"Nothing except reality started to dissolve for you."

"I didn't have the music," I said. "I turned off my speakers."

"Laughable," Clayton said. He drove us north on I-35, away from the office park in which I worked, toward downtown Minneapolis. The skyscrapers looked ghostly in the snow. "Fucking laughable. Half measures avail us nothing, isn't that what the fools in AA say? Just what was the point?"

“I was checking it out.”

“Yeah? So what do you think? Do you want to time travel? Or do you want to stay in *Who Wants To Be a Nympho* land?”

His derisive name for *Pickups* was witless and annoying. I said: “*Time travel*, what do you think?”

Clayton didn’t answer. As the Fugazi song rushed toward its climax it engaged his attention. He drummed on the dashboard and switched to the right lane and followed a Winnebago too close for comfort. Then he passed my exit.

“Where are we going?” I said.

“The eighties,” he told me.

He meant we were going to his apartment. He lived on the fourth floor of an old brick building just north of the zone of yuppiefied converted lofts. His one bedroom apartment had badly scuffed hardwood floors and a view of the rusting fire escape of the building next door. On the walls were hung framed posters of Marilyn Monroe and fifties magazine ads (Lincoln Continental, KodaChrome Color Film) and Public Health Announcements (the virtues of fluoridated water, the health risks posed by loose women). He claimed the display was not ironic but representative of a longing for a period *without* irony. I liked that about him, even if I suspected he was having me on. He was a punker, after all.

While he booted up his Macintosh, I checked out his record collection, the LPs all in plastic static-free album sleeves and in alphabetical order. Most of his music was punk, though there were two score of heavy metal and progressive albums from the seventies and a smattering of hip-hop and Detroit techno from the nineties. I was always amused to find that, despite his disdain for “mop-top” music, he had a selection of what surely must have fit into the mop-top category: Ultravox and Spandau Ballet and Duran Duran. Well, tastes change.

“We have arrived,” he said. “Pull up a chair.”

I sat beside him. On the ancient Mac’s black and white monitor he’d browsed to the Time Travel Application. He hadn’t selected a date. “Where do you want to go today?” he asked.

“Me?”

“Who else? You afraid?”

He was like a teenager, daring me. “No. Not if you’re here to call 911.”

“I’ll do you one better. Your eyes start glazing, I’ll smack you upside the head.”

“Thanks.” He gave me old-school headphones, big and cushiony. I told him, “September third, 1986.”

He nodded. “To see your girlfriend.” But he made no move to flip back the calendar on the Mac.

“What’s up?” I said.

“Can you do a favor for me?”

“Like what?”

“There was this hardcore band called Simone de Beaver. They had a seven inch single called ‘Constipated.’ Out of print for thirty years.”

“And you want me to pick it up for you at a record store.”

“Would you mind?”

“You can’t download it?”

“Of course not. I’d be a thief. Besides—” He looked at his mouse as if it were, well, vermin. “—digital sucks.”

“Okay. Simone de Beaver. 1986?”

I watched him regress the calendar. As the dates blurred I felt a wave of anxiety and I stifled a yawn.

He reached September third, 1986. "Put your headphones on."

I complied. "How do I come back?"

"Volume," he said. "The louder the song, the longer you're gone."

I looked at the screen. My heart was pounding. "Play it for me, then."

Clayton clicked Initiate.

The screen pulsed, generating nested Fresnel squares that switched between dark and light and seemed to breathe. The calendar seemed ghostly, sloppy and wavering, as if sacrificing itself for the screen pulse. I could still make out September third 1986, though it wavered, blocked my effort to concentrate on it. I smelled incense and the skunk of pot.

I heard faint percussion. No hard snare drums, solid bass; but sharp whistles, industrial releases of steam-pipes, the clicks of insect mandibles, the urgent racket of servo-mechanisms. A cacophony that teased by making enough sounds to suggest a rhythm or pattern, but as soon as I formed such a perception, the percussion would betray me, with something arrhythmic and so disturbing I thought my heart would adopt the beat, the *anti-beat*, and follow it into a heart attack.

Something changed.

Music has the power to take one to a place. This music, however, was taking me away from this place, away from Clayton and his apartment and his Macintosh with its breathing glass monitor beaded with sweat.

"Clay—" I started.

Pang of nostalgia, taste of self-consciousness, and I was in a different place.

The same apartment, but different. I sat at the kitchen table, before me a bowl with purple-tinged milk and the soggy remnants of some sugary cereal, maybe Captain Crunch. Someone was showering in the bathroom. I heard a voice and turned to see a little girl, eleven or twelve, in her pajamas, eating a Pop Tart, and watching a television program. MTV.

Martha Quinn was interviewing a heavily made-up member of some hair metal band.

Martha Quinn. She of the face so impossibly beautiful and the manner so angelic I had not dared even feature her in my sex fantasies during high school.

"Hey, what you doing here?" the little girl said.

"Sorry." I blushed. "Wrong floor."

I stood up and walked across the gray-carpeted floor and only as I was fumbling with the front door did the girl have the presence of mind to shout, "Daddy, there's a strange man!"

"What, honey?" I heard from the bathroom.

I was out the door and running down the three flights of stairs onto the street.

18th Street, long before gentrification. Three and four-story brick apartment buildings, some of which were going to seed. There remained liquor stores and delis on the street corners, giving an odd, old feeling, reminiscent of New York. There was something missing—something crucial that made it seem wrong: There was hardly any graffiti to be seen. This was just before the crack epidemic, I guess, just before the Crips and Bloods had imported their stylistic improvements from L.A.

I walked down 28th Street, then up Chicago Ave., a bum beneath the I-94 overpass offering me a drink as I passed him. Chalk one up for the eighties. Even the drunks were generous. A few blocks on and I was in downtown. The glass skyscrapers reflected the gray winter sky, and seemed smaller than I remembered. There was still a bus that read as its destination University Student Union (by flipboard, not electronic signboard). I took out a dollar, but as I searched for the bill slot in the till, the driver, a black woman, said, "It's fifty cents."

A pair of kids laughed at me, and I flustered, acutely conscious of who I was, where I was. I got off the bus. I walked west on 14th Street. Toward the University. Today was registration day. Today, September third, was a turning point, a fork in the universe, a branch in the decision tree of life, where a choice that I made could be unmade. Where that chain of causality that ended in the death of the woman I loved could be broken.

Or not. This could be a dream. Rendered in high-res 64-bit color, accurate down to the gray suede Vans I wore and which were prone to giving me blisters. A young woman glanced at my baggy jeans. I felt in my pocket for change but found only a nickel and a penny. I needed fifty cents; I needed to ride the bus because the main campus of the university was on the other side of the river, accessible only by the freeway. This neighborhood boasted a community college that looked like a Class C office building. A block beyond the campus was a collection of shops: a Goodwill, a Kinko's, two brick-and-mortar bookstores, a Dunkin Donuts, a 7-11, and a record store called Village Vinyl.

I went into Village Vinyl.

A fat young man in a multicolored mohawk and a Punks Not Dead T-shirt looked at me approvingly, and said, "Hey, our CD of the week is the new Replacements album! \$6.99!"

"No, thanks," I said. "No CDs today."

"Oh, that's cool. You're an audiophile."

"No. I'm looking for a group called Simone de Beaver. A single by them. 'Constipated.'"

"I wasn't sure you were a skinhead. But I know Simone. Quebec hardcore. A drummer chick and three guitarists sharing vocals, kind of like the Ugly Beatles." The man came from behind the counter. "Here's singles. Simone de Beaver. 'My Girlfriend's Got Gout.' 'Auto-Erotic Da Fe.' 'Jean-Paul Fart.' Ah. Here we go. 'Constipated.'"

"That's the one."

"\$3.79. It's an import."

I took it from the young man. "I'll buy it."

Just before he rang up the record, he started playing music on the store sound system, something from the Replacements' new album.

"I always liked this song," I said.

"Huh?" queried the young man. "It's a cover?"

"Never mind." I handed a five dollar bill to the young man.

He examined the bill carefully. "Hey, I'm all for sticking it to the Man, but I'm out a job if I accept a counterfeit."

I realized my mistake. It was the newer-style five, the one with Lincoln's face blown up so you could see the pores in his nose. I pulled out five crumpled singles, hoping there hadn't been any obvious change in ones other than the serial code year. The young man counted the dollars, gave me a quizzical look, and I said, "Could I get four quarters in change?"

"Yeah." He handed me the change. As he bagged "Constipated," the Replacements song reached its chorus. I noticed I was humming along.

And I noticed the digits on the cash register were blurry, and that I could see the man's ribs and enlarged beating heart through his Punks Not Dead T-shirt. He handed me the bag. "Dude, you okay?"

Pain of loss, stench of LP sleeves gone musty, feeling like stage fright, and I was in a different place.

A parking lot in winter. Car alarm on a Scion going off, apparently because I'd appeared too near to it. A few inches closer and I'd be lodged in its ugly hood. I saw Volvos, Fords, an Aztec, a Honda Element. When had the dominant aesthetic for auto design become "ugly"? At least it looked like the present. Sometime in the nineties

they'd torn down the depression-era building that had housed Village Vinyl; I remember that a small office building was going to rise in its place. But why build a building when you had such a fine parking lot.

The present in its cold and dirty ugliness.

I caught a bus—dollar gladly accepted—then sat down next to a man who was watching *The Housewives of Rock Springs* on his BlackBerry. At least it wasn't *Pick-ups*. Then I examined the 45. The paper sack in which it was contained was yellowed and brittle. Had it been that way in the store? The sleeve of the 45 was yellowed at the edges, too. The single itself looked scuffed slightly. The label was Montreal Garagaphone.

It was dark when I got back to Clayton's apartment. He buzzed me in but when I got to his room, he was bleary-eyed, confused, wearing a terry-cloth bathrobe. "Where were you, man? I thought you wanted to time travel."

"I did. Where do you think I was?" I pointed at his Macintosh. The browser screen said, TRAVEL TERMINATED PREMATURELY. "You were here. You clicked Initiate. Didn't you see me go?"

"I got weird. I watched you. But I was seeing these different yous. Overlapping ones. Like video frames out of synch. And I saw black spots. So I knew I was having a diabetic crisis. I got my kit and shot me up with insulin, then when I went back to the living room, you were gone. I didn't know what to do."

"You fell asleep."

"Sleep's the nectar of the gods. Clears the head."

I noticed, what with his half-open bathrobe, that he had two dashed diagonal black lines down his chest that met at angle. "So they know where to make the Y incision when they autopsy me, man." I made a face and he said, "Back in the day, I did dumb shit when I was high."

I nodded. "I didn't see Gretchen."

"Your girlfriend? I thought that was what you wanted to see."

"I stopped by a record store on the way to the University of Minnesota campus. I bought this for you."

I handed him the bag with the Simone de Beaver 45.

"What the fuck? This thing's old. Did you get it at a museum?"

I pulled the receipt out of my pocket.

09/03/86 03:28 PM	
Simone de B 45	3.79
6.20% tax	0.23
Total	3.92

*Rock On at Village Vinyl!*

"It's on crappy old paper too," Clayton said. "And the numbers don't add up."

"The clerk was being nice to me because I needed quarters for the bus."

"And Village Vinyl's been gone for years," he said.

"I thought you were the one who believed in time travel."

"Yeah. I also believe a computer guy like you could go to a copy shop and fake any receipt you wanted."

"And how would that explain the 45?" I asked.

"Good question." He took the single out, examined it. "At least it doesn't look warped."

"Why not play it?"

He smiled. "Yeah." He went to his stereo and set it down on the spindle. But before hitting Play, he said, "This nice clerk. Describe him."

"Heavy-set guy. Mohawk. Shirt about punks being alive."

"You mean 'Punks Not Dead'?"

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“Album title by The Exploited. Fucking-A! I knew that dude!”

Then he hit Play.

“Constipated” was loud and fast and just decipherable enough that you could tell the words were in English. The most interesting thing about the band was that the lead singer (Simone?) was female and had a French accent that might have been sexy sung at ballad tempo and if the song didn’t have a chorus that seemed to be: “Can’t talk can’t shit cannot split the infinite.”

Other members of the band occasionally shouted harmony, or maybe anti-harmony. To my irritation. I’ve never appreciated dissonance.

“That’s punk,” I said.

“You can say that again. Real punk.” He flushed with pleasure. “None of that Greed Day shit.”

A gibe at me. He knew I liked Green Day.

“So you believe I time traveled?”

“Shit, yeah. But you came back without seeing your girlfriend.”

“I wanted to see her. Not that she even knew me yet. But I came back too fast. Couldn’t even get out of the record store.”

“I should have played the music louder. ‘Length of temporal discontinuity proportional to amplitude.’”

“You sound sarcastic,” I said.

“And this paper bag is so old.”

“It’s from 1986. Maybe it ages as far forward as you bring it.”

“That would suck,” Clayton said. “Time travel at one second per second. What a fucking joke.” He clicked links in the time travel site, as if compulsively, glancing at them too quickly to possibly absorb anything he was reading; I saw section headers like “outside the temporal light cone” or “reversal of the causality matrix” or “perceptive binding effects of the reticular activating system.” “This is all theoretical shit. None of these fuckers have actually tried to travel in time. If they had, they’d have highlighted their experiences.”

“They’d be on the Tonight Show,” I said. “Front cover of *Time*.”

He didn’t laugh at my pun. He rubbed his bare right foot. His three smallest toes had been amputated because of his diabetes. “Naw. I think maybe what’s going on is they’re working for the NSA or the CIA, and they got to keep it low-key. Either that, or they’ve had successful runs, and they’re not talking about them because they don’t want the NSA after them.”

He sounded paranoid. “You *did* take your insulin?”

“Don’t patronize me, man. Explain it better if you can.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “They have a user’s forum?”

“Nothing but the webmaster’s e-mail address.”

“Then I’ll send an e-mail. Or maybe contact that guy on the Diabetes forum you said turned you on to the site. See if my experience is typical.”

He rubbed his phantom toes again. “Not yet. I want to try first. I want the cure.”

“Right now?”

“Tomorrow. Come here, same time.”

Gretchen was older than me, a grad student when I was still an undergrad. She’d minored in psychology as an undergrad and despised the discipline. She hated Freud. She hated labels, hated that people would label others as anal-retentive or depressive or narcissistic or as having a death wish, especially if the “diagnosis” was based on just a single conversation. But I’d seen the pattern before with Clayton, how after he’d had a diabetic crisis, and taken his insulin, how’d he go on with con-

spiracy theories: Tipper Gore killed rock and roll, Bush orchestrated 9/11, Obama was born in Kenya, there was a cure for diabetes Big Pharma was suppressing. Sounded paranoid to me.

I wondered what Gretchen would have made of the fact that the next day at work, once having submitted the *Pickups* episode to Stacey for approval, I spent three hours reading websites about Kabala-generated hyper-dimensional number sets, wormholes, and temporal vortex generators. Or my obsession with the eighties. Would she have disapproved of me diagnosing myself with OCD?

Did the acronym OCD even exist in 1986?

Clayton was blasting a Sisters of Mercy song loud enough that I had to pound on the door before he turned down his stereo, then let me in. "What's the matter?" I asked.

He was in the terry-cloth robe again. Eyes baggy, skin rock-and-roll pale, he looked ten years older than yesterday. I noticed his acoustic guitar on his bed. "Writing songs all day," he explained.

"Eating?"

"Bull's eye! Couldn't sleep. Studied time travel. Wrote songs about it." He showed me his fingertips, not to display guitar string calluses but tiny needle marks. "Testing my blood. Glucose levels all over the place. Trying to eat, trying to rest. Doing neither well. Royally fucked myself up. Can't go a night without sleep anymore."

"You're not twenty-five. You're diabetic."

"Thank you, Mr. Obvious."

His Mac's internet browser had [myfourthdimension.org](http://myfourthdimension.org) up. "We should do this another night, when you're feeling better."

His faced drooped. "You're probably right. Unless—"

"—unless what?"

"Do you want to try again, Bob?"

He gave me quarters for the bus (all pre-1987), lent me a T-shirt that said University of Beer, to replace the dot-com shirt I had been wearing, and then a few minutes later clicked Initiate.

Atonal music, veins and bones in my hands, breath of wrong and touch of sweet. And I was back in 1986.

It was the same apartment, a little later in the day, the little girl and her father gone, the bowl of soggy cereal moved to the kitchen sink. I locked the front door (switch on the inside of the doorknob), then hurried out of the apartment building.

I caught the 56 University bus. It was the same driver as before, a petite black woman with her hair in braids. She paid me no attention while I put the two quarters into the till but then gave me a look that said: Are you going to sit down, or what?

I sat next to a businessman in a vested suit who was writing figures on a yellow pad while he entered strokes into a Casio calculator. The keys played musical notes and I thought of the Kraftwerk song about the operator of the pocket calculator.

On Washington Avenue, people got on the bus. The warmth was stifling. Didn't they air-condition busses in 1986? Greenery outside a blur, not changed much. More and more students climbed on. Bronzed legs, those multicolored shorts called jams, generally less flesh on display but the flesh you saw—it glowed, did it ever glow, had the girls shone with health that way, ponytails like spun gold, teeth an astounding white; and no tattoos to be seen nor chains dangling from noses. In fact it was I, not they, who was the strange one, with my shaved head, and I looked out the window past the businessman to see the Mississippi River, gray-brown then glaring bright as we crossed the Washington Avenue Bridge, bus in the shadows of the pedestrian overpass.

Gretchen had driven off this bridge in 1991.

In those days registration was done in person in the Athletic Field House. Students bearing backpacks paged through course descriptions and penciled in bubbles in registration forms, the kind that had to be read by mainframe computers. Discarded forms littered the floor like confetti.

Gretchen, for all her later dismissal of tribal identities qua musical tastes, had not yet abandoned the sartorial trappings of those tastes: I saw her standing at a table filling out a form, and she was dressed in Robert Smith regalia: hair dyed black and moussed into a fountain-shape, heavy mascara, ruby-red lipstick, elf boots, black dress not quite loose-fitting enough to hide her curves. She wore costume jewels on each of her fingers, and tapped them one digit at a time as she considered her choices. Beside her stood her then-boyfriend, Frederick, a thin Minnesota aesthete who wore his yellow hair spiked short on top and in a long yellow tail at back. Like a proto-Clayton, he advertised his agendas, with his Save the Whales and Dead Kennedys buttons pinned to his backpack.

I saw myself appear.

I had hair then, in what I thought of as my Bono haircut, hair shoulder-length in the back and cut above the ears at the sides. No one knew the word mullet in 1986. Baggy black tank-top and jams of fluorescent paisley. Legs whose paleness suggested ill-health rather than the actuality of long nights in computer labs or dance clubs. I was walking as if diffidently through the center, taking a circuitous route around tables and groups of students. But I knew I had intent. I had eyed Gretchen, and meant to get close to her.

And I, the older I, meant to get closer to her too, but only to prevent the encounter that my twenty-year-old self hoped to achieve. But as I walked my pulse quickened and my arms grew sweaty and even though the students parted for me out of respect for an older man, the oddball faculty member or eternal grad student that I might be, I found myself transfixed by Gretchen. I thought as a child that there were unfathomable depths in all girls who dressed as she, that they were all death-rock-listening, Proust-quoting, existentialists who majored in philosophy or French and would dance by themselves, slowly turning in the strobe light as they smoked their clove cigarettes—I thought these things then; and though I, the older me, knew that if these traits described anyone, it was not Gretchen, it didn't matter. I felt the same attraction as I had twenty-six years before. Some claim experience is a teacher. But if my mind can learn, my heart cannot.

So I hesitated, long enough for the child-me to station himself beside Gretchen at the table.

The young me took his course list from his backpack and pretended to study it. What he was really doing was listening to Frederick and Gretchen argue. I couldn't hear them over the din of the Field House, but I remembered the gist of the argument, that she shouldn't take more than two courses, especially not if she was TAing; and watching myself react I could guess the milestones of their discussion. First the jerk of surprise, the actual little jump (or pogo-hop as Gretchen would come to call it) as the name "Concepts in Group Theory" was spoken by Gretchen and the implication, that she was *a grad student in math*, was arrived at as if by way of my feet, not brain. And second, a few moments later, the drawing-in of my shoulders, and turning away from the two, for I'm one to blush, and not for just embarrassment, but for jealousy too; and I was jealous then, or more properly, *envious*. Frederick was reminding her how she liked to go to movies, and how "that one semester" she'd gotten acne from studying too much and sleeping too little; and she'd replied, "What you're really saying is I won't be available so much for you."

A sphere of silence seemed to rise around the three of them, as Frederick balled his left hand in obvious anger, and child-me with shaking fingers tried to bubble-in his name on a scan sheet. Now I—the older me—could hesitate no longer. I was not supposed to be audience for this melodrama. I was supposed to act.

I jogged as, in the furthering silence, the child-me having overcome his shock, regained his thinking apparatus and worked his way to a strategy for wooing her—

“Which class are you TAing?”

No.

I didn’t remember thinking it through that quickly.

“Statistics for Nonscientists,” she said. “Tuesday and Thursday 4 P.M.”

Here Frederick would snap his pencil in half and say, “Why don’t you give him your phone number, too?”

But I intervened. “Statistics is the poor man’s probability.”

Frederick turned toward me. This was his own line. His eyes were wide as if he were staring at the future.

Then he punched me in the nose.

I woke on the floor to the whine of a machine. “*Madre de dios!*” cried the short Latina woman behind the floor polisher. I thought I had terrified her, materializing here on the Athletic Field House floor, but was disabused of that notion as she shut off her machine, then came over to me. “Are you okay, mister?”

My Beer University shirt was speckled with blood. Fresh drips—I still bled from my nose. The woman gave me a rag that I used to staunch the flow of blood. Then she took out her cell phone. “Somebody hit you? You want me to call police?”

“Let me call?” I said.

I dialed Clayton. “It’s Bob,” I said.

He was quiet for a second, as if making an effort to compose himself.

“Where’d you go?” he asked finally.

“1986,” I said. “Like we planned.”

“Oh, no you don’t, you fucker,” he said. “You left me again.”

The resentment in his voice worried me. I heard confusion too. “Did you have another diabetic crisis?”

“Don’t test me, man. I’m taking care of myself.”

“Good.” I looked out the big glass wall that fronted the Event Center, and could see the streetlights casting perfect light cones on the falling snow. Fine-grained snow bespeaking frigid temperatures. “Think you could pick me up from the Event Center on campus?”

“Event Center? Too late for a bus?”

“All I’m wearing is jeans and your T-shirt.”

Driving back, Clayton talked. “I need one of those webcams. I kept getting that weird effect watching you. Double-yous. No, not the letter ‘W.’ Like TV ghosts.”

“Then what happened?”

“I blinked. Maybe I fell asleep. But you were gone. My blood sugar was low, so I drank some orange juice. I need a webcam. Or a person. Independent verification. Maybe we should put an ad on Craigslist. Wanted: time traveler’s apprentice.”

“You don’t believe me. You don’t think it happened.”

“You got a bloody nose. And you’ve got a smell. A smell . . . like hot humid weather.”

“The smell of the summer of ‘86.”

“So did you fuck her?” he asked,

“What?”

“Don’t tell me your motives for seeing your girlfriend are pure and virtuous.”

“I was excited to see her, yeah. But I told you, I *don’t want* her to date me.”

“The baby you, you mean. Baby Bobby.”

“Yeah. The twenty-year-old.”

“Could she date the forty-six-year-old you?”

That was like a punch to my gut. “That’s perverse, dude. College girl dating someone almost twice her age.”

“Some girls dig older guys. Some girls date professors.”

“I’m no professor. It’s not ethical anyway.”

“Not ethical *now*. But we’re talking Reagan-era here.”

“She’d freak when she figured out who I really was. She freaked already, probably. I mean I must have disappeared when Frederick punched me.”

“Maybe. The time travel site says temporal anomalies are usually integrated into people’s personal narratives.”

“Right,” I said. I could talk the lingo: “Time’s just a mental construct.”

“Well, if you didn’t disappear, and this Fred-dick knocked you out, you better hope the police didn’t come to the scene and ID you while she was there.”

I listened to the hard tap of the snow pellets against the windshield. Clayton was playing something artsy and atonal, Sonic Youth or some such, music that would normally have aggravated me, but which I found interesting tonight. The tapping snow seemed to enforce a rhythm the musicians had not intended.

I realized I was in a good mood.

I’d seen Gretchen.

But had I changed history?

Gretchen mentioned more than once to me the absurdity of the phrase “changing history.” History could be made, but once made it could not be altered, except in the trivial sense of an historian’s reinterpretation or the inane sense of a postmodernist’s deconstruction. She was a hard-headed mathematician. She saw time as a linear vector.

She did not believe in time travel.

Clayton took me to my apartment, but declined to come up for a Dr. Pepper. Just as well. I knew my entrance into the apartment would confirm or deny the success of my mission. I turned on the light in the entry hall of my flat and immediately knew I had failed. On the wall beside the old-fashioned phone nook was the print we had bought while in Santorini in 1989, a photo-realistic painting of sunset on white-washed blue-domed houses. My heart sank. I went into my study and there was Gretchen’s Corner: pictures of us skiing in the Alps, her getting her Ph.D. at the U, the two of us hand-in-hand stepping across the mighty Mississippi at its source. The shot of her (cropped at the shoulder), taken at the beach in Portugal, where she’d gone topless to prove she could and that I’d kept because her expression—squinty-eyed and looking over her shoulder—so clearly expressed her need for me to protect her. A teddy bear with a missing button eye. And her books, *Probability Theory* and *Computable Functions* and *Modern Algebra* and a volume, her doctoral thesis, pages already yellowing, entitled in Courier font along its plastic binder, *Lie Variables Applied to N-Spaced Topologies*.

I took my nightly dose of Mirtazapine and chased it down with two shots of whiskey and kept myself from crying. This was my method. It had been almost a decade since I’d cried.

It was only when I took off the Beer University T-shirt and noticed that its blood-stains had blackened as stains can do after years that I remembered the title of her thesis had been *Lie Variables in N-Space Topologies*.

*In, not Applied to.*

Or so in my drunken state I seemed to remember.

Next day at work, pubic hair was okay. *Just* pubic hair, mind you, no pricks, no labia, nothing pink and purple and engorgement-prone. "Are you a prude all of a sudden?" Stacey asked when she came to my cube to talk with me. "I sent the e-mail about it a week ago, and you said, cool, whatever. Then you sent me the video with all the same brushups."

"Sorry," I said, "I forgot."

"You even said pubic hair's pretty much the same as armpit hair and we don't edit that."

"Like I said, I'm sorry. I won't make the mistake again."

"Cool," she said, then she patted my shoulder, as if she understood that whatever strain I'd been going through was obviously responsible for the mistake.

I had the vaguest memory of a change in our censorship policy, but it seemed dreamlike. But when I checked my e-mail history, I saw the conversation we'd had, my positive response, which was more along the lines of "since women shave their pubes now the same way they shave their pits it's no big deal."

My stomach churned.

Had my voyage back affected nothing but the trivial?

In Traxx that night the jukebox played "Just Like Heaven," the bouncy Cure song that made me think of dancing with Gretchen at a wedding reception sometime in late '89, but which put Clayton in a darker mood. "The Cure had serious songs. Weighty songs. All you ever hear these days is their pop shit."

"I'll check to see if the jukebox has 'The Baby Screams.'"

Clayton sipped from his Dr. Pepper. "Diet," he said. "Disgusting at first, but you get used to it. You even get to liking it. So what's wrong with you?"

"Gretchen's a bigger thing than Dr. Pepper."

"No duh. But why?"

"I fucked her life up, man. She could have been a lecturer at Princeton. She had an offer!"

"But she stayed in Minneapolis with you."

"We moved to St. Paul."

"Same difference. She could have been an Ivy League professor. But she sacrificed her career so you could be a cartoon animator."

"Graphics software designer."

"Whatever." Clayton held his Dr. Pepper up toward the neon light behind the bar as if ascertaining the vintage of the soft drink. "It's the story of every relationship. I joined a band that was way too ska-punk for my tastes. But I had to join just 'cause I had a crush on the drummer. A girl. A girl drummer!"

"How'd that work out for you?"

"She was gay. But you see the parallel. A girl drummer! A girl mathematician!"

"I don't think it's the same thing at all."

"Sure it is. We're all connected. Hearts make us do things that may not be good for our careers."

"I got a good job. Gretchen taught algebra at a community college."

"Yeah. And I got kicked out of the band for wanting to play Black Flag covers."

"It's still not the same thing," I said.

"But now you changed things."

"Yeah." I explained to him how the name of the thesis changed, how my memories of the policies for *Pickups* didn't match the e-mails.

He shrugged. "So maybe her life came out okay."

"I know it didn't."

"How do you know? Do you know how the new timeline went? Did you force her into prostitution? Did you give her AIDS or something?"

I didn't want to talk any more about Gretchen. "All I know is I got myself a bloody nose."

"Violent shocks to the body may break the temporal affiliation."

It sounded like a quote from [myfourthdimension.org](http://myfourthdimension.org). "And the right kind of music."

"Yeah." He downed his Dr. Pepper. "I want to try next. I wanna go to the future."

Clayton, with an eye for the portentous, had turned off the lights and lit an array of votive candles. Candle flames reflected off his Mac's screen as he pricked his finger, then touched the sphere of blood to a piece of paper like a litmus strip. "Blood sugar's just starting to go down," he said. "Let's fire this up before I get edgy."

"This seems dangerous," I said. "I can see you collapsed in a diabetic coma and people just stepping around you."

"Your problem is not so much rose-colored glasses for looking at the past. It's more shit-colored glasses for looking at the future."

I shrugged. "I see trends."

"I see trends, too, man." He tapped his pocket. "I got crackers in case I feel the sugar level going down too fast."

His plan was to travel to 2035 and get into an emergency room. He did indeed see trends. They'd mapped the human genome in 2003, released the first successful stem cell therapies in 2012, a couple of better ones the year later. He figured diabetes and most diseases "that involved your own cells basically crapping out" would be cured within ten years. Give ten years more for universal health insurance to "arrive for real," and he'd be set.

No, he didn't have health insurance now. But he didn't bother reporting his gig income to the IRS, either.

He was taking his phone with Britney Spears, Yeah Yeah Yeahs, Lady Gaga, MP3s of obscure trance-hop from the nineties, and some current nü-metal that he'd downloaded, not because he liked the music, but because "I want to do this right."

"But *digital*?"

"Yeah, it sucks. But I'm gonna carry a Walkman in 2035?"

I saw his point. He said, "I'll get to Minneapolis General. You can pick me up, right?"

"You'll call me," I said.

"I'm doing this." He looked at me. "Don't watch."

I had no intention of watching. I had no interest in going to the future. Reversing time; that subject interested me. But visiting the nameless horrors of tomorrow, no.

We would see them soon enough.

But I wanted to watch him. I sat on the floor, leaning against the wall, the same wall that his computer desk was set against. I could see his face, bluish in the light from his screen. He nodded at me, then started clicking through browser screens. When dissonant music started playing from his speakers, I pushed silicone ear plugs into my ears.

Clayton was there, and not there. He was gray-headed, no he was silver-headed, he was young, he was old. Changing. His ponytail shook as though he were nodding his head to a rapid beat. No. As if he were jittery, gone vibrato like a tuning fork, shaking like David Byrne gone spastic, but no, it was not a shaking, it was something else: it was a series of stroboscopic images, a dozen a second, each image of a subtly different Clayton, hair gray then black, clean-shaved, bearded, now hexagrams tattooed on his arm, now dragons now skulls, heavy with a paunch then skeletal as if sickly; and that association brought to mind the state of my own gut. Maybe

it was the warmth and staleness of the room; maybe it was the candles that seemed sinister not holy; maybe it was that my gut could only interpret what I saw as the perturbation of the vestibular system that augurs disease; whatever the reason, I had to get to the bathroom.

I did and I vomited into the toilet and as I did I barely heard the *whoomp* from the living room, barely felt the chilly breeze against my back. I wiped my mouth, then pushed myself with rubbery arms to my feet.

All the candles save one had blown out and papers that had been on the computer desk were scattered on the floor.

And Clayton was gone.

I brushed my teeth and washed my face and scrubbed the toilet bowl with blue cleaner until I'd returned Clayton's bathroom to its normal pristine condition. I still felt nausea so I looked in his medicine cabinet and found vials of Ibuprofen and prescriptions for Percocet and Oxycontin, but also a jar of Pepto Bismol. I took a Percocet, for my nose, washing it down with Pepto.

I dared to go back to the living room. I took out my earplugs. The Mac was still playing the unsettling music—think Swans played backward—so I turned the volume down to the first notch above mute, and I opened a new web browser to prevent myself from falling to the spell of the Time Travel Application. I didn't want to go to 2035. I wanted to Google Gretchen's name, find if my awkward appearance in 1986 had had any repercussions. But using Clayton's Mac for such a query seemed somehow even more a violation than stealing his drugs. And what if loading some strange page, some Flash-rich sound-heavy site, crashed the old browser on his ancient machine?

I didn't want to find out if hanging the Time Travel Application would affect Clayton while he was absent.

On my smartphone, I sent an e-mail to the webmaster of myfourthdimension.org. Just to ask him how risky it was to use the software. And how often those going into the past had managed to change history.

Clayton had been gone an hour when the Percocet really got to me. I decided to sit in his leather easy chair and close my eyes, just for a second—

My phone rang: Bronski Beat's "Hit that Perfect Beat."

It was five A.M.

I answered.

"No go, man. I'm in the emergency room."

"What do you mean, no go?"

"I'm reacting to it. To the medicine. Flushed and can hardly breathe."

"It worked? You're in the future?"

"No, dumb fuck. I'm back to now. The stuff I got in the future fucked me royal."

"Oh." I woke up. "So you want me to come?"

"Yeah. In about an hour. They just want to make sure I'm back to normal."

So I stole a Red Bull to fight my grogginess—didn't want the irony of a car crash tonight—and drove carefully to the hospital.

I was alarmed to see the female orderly pushing Clayton in a wheelchair. He was pink-skinned and bright-eyed, but somehow seemed smaller, as if shrunken slightly, or as though he'd aged on his trip. "She won't let me walk," he said to me.

"Sorry," the orderly said. "Rules."

"What happened?" I said, as I followed them out of the emergency room waiting area.

"Just an allergic reaction," Clayton said. "To bad insulin."

“You could have died,” the orderly said. She told me: “The doctors wanted him to stay a day for observation, but he refused.”

“Nothin’ to see,” he said. He held a box. “They want me to check my glucose hourly; I can do that.”

At the curb when my car was waiting, she said, “Can you watch him, sir?”

“Yeah,” I said. It was Saturday; work would be no problem.

“No cure in 2035,” he said as I drove. “Stem cell therapies still have too many side effects. They got what they call mimetic insulin, real human insulin grown in test tubes.”

“They gave it to you?” I asked.

“Yeah. Plan worked. I got into the Emergency Room—actually two blocks away ’cause that changed. They typed my blood and gave me a shot, and I was on my way. Fifty minutes total. Something to be said for socialized medicine.”

“Except it didn’t work.”

“Fuck you. What didn’t work was first the music. My phone couldn’t find service so it refused to play the Lady Gaga song I’d wanted. Couldn’t play anything. What I had to use was these earbuds the hospital provides you for drowning out the screams of the other patients, and I had to switch until I found an oldies station, Shakira and The Pope Likes Boys and Metallica, and finally it was the Metallica that took me away.”

“Back to the emergency room.”

“No! To a fucking frozen fountain! They built the new hospital right above it.” He gestured toward a halogen-lit cement plaza. “And I climb out of the fountain, I’m cold as hell but I’m itching, I’m *burning*, and my eyes are swelling up, and I can hardly breathe. So I’m stumbling back toward the hospital and there’s this nurse, this old butch, and she grabs me, and says, ‘You’re having anaphylactic shock,’ and she leads me back into the Emergency Room, only it’s the one we know now, squealing Mexican babies and senior citizens slumped in their wheelchairs, and there’s a triage and then I’m in a curtained room hooked up to an IV and they’re pumping norepinephrine and who knows what else to stabilize me.” Clayton brought down his right hand as though playing a violent chord. “Then this fucker doctor asked if I’d been shooting heroin!”

I turned onto Clayton’s street. “So what good’s the future then?”

“Don’t you get it, man? You saw how the Simone de Beaver record degraded. Stuff ages as it’s brought forward. And the same must happen going backward. In reverse. Insulin must do all these negative chemical reactions in your body. Regressing to what it was. Maybe changing to water and piss and who knows whatever crap the insulin molecules would have been in 2012.”

I thought about this. “I hope you got a tetanus shot.”

“You kidding? I got the whole battery of vaccinations. I made them give them to me.”

“And you told ‘em about time travel?”

“Fuck, no. I didn’t want to be in the psycho ward.”

I found a parking place not far from his building. “I think I should stay with you tonight, dude.”

“What the fuck? Do you think I’m crazy?”

“We’re in this together, man. I don’t want you to die.”

“Fu—,” he started, but he couldn’t even finish the imprecation.

He was too exhausted to put up a fight.

Gretchen had a low opinion of people who swore too much. She thought colorful language signaled shallow thinking. And she thought that harsh words could be just

as damaging as physical assault. You can recover from a broken arm; but there was no way save drugs or drastic surgery to make vicious words lose their sting.

Frederick could have a mouth worse than Clayton's.

"It's *green*, man," Clayton said, next morning. I was cooking him an omelet with eggs from free-range chickens and organic goat's milk. Clayton was sitting at his MIDI keyboard, noodling around with a cheerful improvisation atop an aggressive drum 'n' bass electronic loop.

"As in *Green Eggs and Ham*?" I said.

"No, you dumb fuck. The *Future*. They've started *coating* the surfaces of buildings with this green algae stuff. Looks like moss but it's bioengineered to absorb tremendous amounts of carbon dioxide. They got some red and blue coating too, but it's mostly green."

"Welcome to the Jungle," I said.

The Guns' n Roses reference didn't faze him. "It's not that bad. Lotsa buildings still look the same. But it *was* hot and humid like July though I picked October to go to." He played a trill that sounded more Moby than Mozart. "And all the rooftops either have solar panels or gardens. They're taking climate change seriously."

"Still no cure for diabetes."

"They're close, man. I talked to the docs. They got a dozen gene therapy treatments in the pipeline for growing kidney and pancreatic cells. They said I was bad enough they could fast-track me into a study. But they needed my Triage Card."

I removed the omelet from the pan and put it on a plate. "Your 'Triage Card'?"

"Everybody has 'em. Entire medical history on a microchip."

"Sounds fascist," I said.

He pounded a chord on his keyboard. "Gotta allocate resources somehow. I told 'em I'd lost mine."

"They believed that?"

"Man, you don't have any faith in people. Hospital people are good souls. They don't have time to play police. They just treated me with the insulin. But then this damn little girl starts screaming on the other side of the curtain, and I play the music until I'm out of there."

I handed him the plate and a fork. "So what's the lesson? Should we buy stock in these green algae companies?"

"Temporal paradoxes, man."

"They cancel out," I said. "The universe is causally conservative."

"On average." He drank coffee from a mug shaped like John Lennon's head. "I got a plan already. What I need is the information, not the drugs themselves. See, if I can memorize the chemical formulas of the cure, I don't have to worry about the chemicals themselves degrading."

"Only your memories."

He glared at me. "Rainmaker."

He'd misuse words like that sometimes. He had meant to say I was raining on his parade, or some such. I took pleasure in my superior literacy, but that pleasure was quickly tempered by shame at my pettiness. Gretchen had been like that with me sometimes. Ph.D. in math to my B.A. in computer science, Fulbright Scholarship to my First Bank of Fargo \$750 grant, perfect SATs to my double 670s. She kept me conscious of my intellectual inferiority. In Paris once she corrected my pronunciation and grammar when I'd tried gamely to order a meal using my schoolboy French. Once she told me I was as good-looking as Ronald Reagan and even smarter.

In the early years after she was dead I had to force myself to remember her

slights. I had to revel in her cruelties, like a dog rolling in its own shit, to keep myself from crying.

When I finished my own omelet, I said to Clayton, "I want to go today."

"No can do," Clayton said. He massaged his fingers as though the IV tube in the back of his hand might have damaged one of his nerves. "I got two sets to play tonight at Husky Doves."

I always thought a place named like that, you'd expect Bob Mould selling Eskimo Pies. "Then tomorrow. At my place."

"I'll bring the beer," he said.

9/11.

A date that probably has resonance for most of you, by virtue of the terrorist incident cut into our collective cortices, but it's 9/11/86 that has meaning for me, for that was the day I followed Gretchen out of the classroom. At least the child-me did. At least I *remembered* the child-me doing so, but what good is memory if the facts themselves are as mutable as whims.

The older me followed. I was disguised: ponytail wig, sunglasses, maroon backpack, white Reeboks, and while I shook off the disorientation of a quarter-century travel, standing in the hallway outside Capek Hall Room 212 listening to Gretchen trying to enliven Bayesian probability with an anecdote about choosing socks from her hamper, and the class not laughing (it was a hot afternoon and a seventy-five-minute session), but me smiling because I remembered how she had once decided to *not bother* with wearing matching socks (most of them were shades of brown or blue anyway) because, really, is life so long that we have time to worry about such minutiae?

Really, is life so long?

There was a corkboard I read with announcements: semester abroad in Perugia, subjects wanted for a cognitive psychology test, meeting of the Workers of the World this coming Friday (their determination admirable given glasnost), grad students offering tutoring in calculus.

Then the class ended and as the students filed out, I pretended to pay special attention to a flier for a Take Back the Night march, as if that would win me points with Gretchen. But she walked past me, giving me nothing more than a glance, and I would have chased after her except she was with Frederick.

I stared at them as they walked down the hallway, trying to discern the nature of their relationship. Not holding hands, not walking in step as lovers do, their body posture suggested they were arguing but if they were saying anything it was at too low a volume for me to hear. I started to follow them—

—just as the child-me walked by, moving with a furtiveness that was almost comical, as if he'd studied stalking from spy-film spoofs.

"Are you going after them, Robert?" I said.

Turning, startled, his backpack ripped down a Greenpeace poster from a closed office door.

"Who are you?" he said. "What do you want?"

"I'm with The Company," I said.

"The Company?"

"Yes. We know all about you. Robert Jonathan Marshall. Born in South Dakota, grew up in Fargo, childhood best friend Timmy Manzanara. Taking this beginning statistics class even though you've already completed your math requirements for your CS degree."

His eyes widened. Had I really ever been that easily scared? "What do you want?"

"We'd like to hire you. Once you graduate."

"I'm going to grad school."

"No, you're not. We think you'd like to do computer graphics work in the private sector."

"But you're government."

I sighed. "Bobby, do I *look* government?"

Gretchen and Frederick had started down a stairwell; now child-Bob gave me his full attention. "You look—" he critically squinted at me; I've seen myself so scrutinize an emergent pimple on my nose. "You're the dude Frederick the Great punched out."

Frederick the Great. I'd forgotten the name. "Yeah. We're interested in you. We're interested in Frederick, too. As well as in Gretchen Sulski."

"But why? But what for?"

"We deal in prediction. We deal in stochastic probability. We have advice for you. If you get an offer from the NSA, something that'll take you to D.C. or Colorado Springs, take it. Get out of Minneapolis. And whatever you do, don't pursue Gretchen."

"Gretchen?" He grinned. "I already asked her out. We're going out for dinner tomorrow."

"Good for you," I said. "Hey, want to get a beer?"

He wasn't twenty-one yet but the puritanical nineties were still a few years off, and there was a bar I knew in the Riverside section of Minneapolis where screwdrivers could be had for two dollars and a pitcher of beer for twice that. No one asked for ID. We were the only white people in there, save a bewhiskered drunk asleep on a barstool, and I sat on a vinyl-covered bench the tear of which had been mended by a strip of duct tape. Rick James played from a cheap sound system. Bobby sat across from me holding his glass of beer so tightly I feared the glass would shatter in his hand. Two tables over, there was a transvestite—gold lamé dress and stilettos and long black eyelashes and lipstick bright as blood—who watched Bobby with amusement as she sipped her martini.

"Drink up, Bobby," I said. I drank my screwdriver quickly and he followed suit.

"Only my family calls me Bobby."

"I'm close to family," I said. The anti-depressants had made the trip back with me, I realized; I was mildly drunk. I chose my words carefully. "Gretchen's four years older than you. And emotionally—you're a male, and a male *engineer* at that, so emotionally, she's, like, seven years older than you. There's this gap between you that you can't begin to fathom. And this mystery you like about her, her gypsy-punk look, that sadness in her eyes, why, those mysteries aren't mathematical problems you can solve."

He listened to me longer than I had expected him to, poured himself another glass of beer, and as I started to tell him things I'd only understood after years of self-analysis—how what he really wanted was to *fix* her, to save her, to brighten her gloom, and that trait while admirable was itself a pathology, a typical male depressive's way of wanting to change the world by changing that person closest to oneself, his mate, his female mirror-image—he watched me as if mesmerized, finishing his second glass of beer without a thought and starting on his third. His cheeks were beginning to bloom with what I took for the embarrassment of realization: the shame of sudden insight. But he finished his beer and said, "Screw you, dude. I don't know who you are or why you're messing with my head but I don't want to hear any more of this shit."

"It's for your own good."

"Yeah. Gonna have my first date of my junior year and you're warning me against it. Who is 'The Company'? Frederick? Are you a private eye he hired to dig up shit on me?"

I took off my sunglasses. "Don't you recognize me?"

He blinked. But he was too angry, and maybe too drunk, to make the morphological calculations that would add twenty-seven years to his own familiar features. "I know what it is. You want her. You want Gretchen. Well, screw you."

“But Bobby,” I said. My voice slurred. “I’m *you*.”

He stood up. “No. You’re that guy there.” He pointed at the passed-out drunk on the barstool.

Then he threw a crumpled five dollar bill on the table. “I’m taking her out.”

He left the bar.

I should have followed him.

But I sat there feeling sorry for myself, and then someone put Prince’s “1999” on the jukebox.

I woke on a dance floor.

The club was neocon, men and women dressed alike in black robes and with hair cut severely short, moving rigidly to the thrash-hop beat as though dancing were a duty not a pleasure, some grimacing, some wincing as if in pain, none interested in me as I moved across the dance floor. The few who did not seem focused on their own inner torments were watching with avidity the great video screen that occupied the ceiling and which rewarded them with scenes of hell: strafed villages in Vietnam, corpse-strewn rivers in Rwanda, bloody craters in Iraq; and less frequently scenes of heroes: John Calvin, Savonarola, Oliver Cromwell, John Knox. The disciples of denial, the apostles of ahedonia, the high priests of Puritanism.

Neocon.

For a moment I knew the movement had not existed prior to my return.

Then I remembered its history, its sudden popularity in just the last few months.

Piety is easy to sell with a propulsive beat.

“You back?” Clayton said.

He was sitting in the empty bathtub, shivering. “The bathroom’s where you go to sit out a tornado,” he explained. “You Fargo boys know that.”

“What are you talking—”

“Don’t give me that look. I’m not having a diabetic crisis. I tell you, man, I felt the same creepy change in air pressure you get when the sky goes black in the afternoon and the funnel cloud is about to drop. What it was, I think, was *you*, changing, flickering, gone, back, gone. Churning the air, changing the barometer, making vortices. Summoning the tornado. I ran to the bathroom before it could hit.”

“There wasn’t any tornado,” I said.

The living room had looked unchanged. And Gretchen’s shrine was still resident.

“Fuck you,” Clayton said softly. “I didn’t say there was a tornado. Only that it felt like one about to hit.”

I nodded. We both seemed tired, reduced. I said to him, “What do you think about neocon?”

“The dance music? Pseudo-reactionary product for the wannabe alt elite. Why?”

I shrugged.

The significance of the dancehall music seemed to be fading by the second.

When I got to work on Monday, Stacey was sitting at my cubicle, playing the *Pick-ups* show I’d submitted to her for her approval. That she was playing it on my machine, not her own, was not a good omen. She was wearing earbuds, nodding sometimes yet shaking her head more often. At least, she looked exhausted, not bored. But she watched to the end.

“What the crap is the incidental music?”

“The Gypsy Inquisitors,” I said.

“Let me rephrase. Why have you added the most sadistic-sounding, obscenity-laden tracks I’ve ever heard to a network broadcast show?”

"I thought irony would be funny. Neocon would lighten the mood."

"And you must have thought you'd pay the FCC when we got fined? And you'd pony up the cash when Krystalscope sues us for breach of copyright?"

"Sorry," I said. "I could transpose the melody and filter the lyrics to make them indecipherable."

"You do that," she said. She took out her earbuds and stood. "It better be done before you leave today. We've been noticing a certain lack of disinterest in your work lately."

"Disinterest?" Surely that was the wrong word.

"Apathy, even." She touched my shoulder. "Are you having problems of some sort? We have a service for those who need help with family issues. Or drug problems."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll keep that in mind."

She was one step away from firing me. Maybe being fired would have its advantages. It would confer upon me a respectability in Clayton's eyes, for one thing. Downwardly mobile, boho, alterna-boy; I could affect fashions as I hadn't in twenty years. A lump formed in my throat.

As if Gretchen would care.

My e-mail chimed.

From: exmachina@myfourthdimension.org.

Subject: Breaking the Shackles

Of Self is all you're doing. That Time is a patching together or linkage of monads, instants, frames even Bertrand Russell knew but what he didn't understand was that the Self is Exactly That Collection of instants, nothing more nothing less, but that linkage or filmstock that is your life while it may endlessly be edited, new frames inserted old ones enhanced or colorized it will Like Celluloid Film scratch and distort and discolor. Ultimately it will break.

Is that death?

Ask the alcoholic in the middle of a blackout.

Ask the martyr once the bullets have felled him.

The healthy mind gives into Paradox but the insane fights It.

Peace.

"So he's a crazy person," Clayton said. "Who the fuck's Bertrand Russell anyway?"

"Mathematician," I said. "Philosopher."

Clayton ate tofu I'd fried in teriyaki sauce. He was a vegan. I didn't believe someone who self-identified vegan wouldn't know who Bertrand Russell was. But then hey, I'd been a computer science major, and I probably knew the names of mathematicians the same way he knew the names of all the punk albums ever released on Rough Trade. "So either he's crazy, or he's trying to warn us off."

"Or both," I said.

"Then why doesn't he just take the effing site down?"

I shrugged. "It hasn't worked for us."

He stabbed a cube of tofu with his chopstick. "Speak for yourself, bucko. I'm going back. 2050 this time. So the patents have all expired for the cure. I'm gonna copy the formulas onto a USB drive. Then I'm going to write down as much as I can find on notebooks and stuff."

"What if they still haven't cured it?" I asked.

"The cure's inevitable. Technology and knowledge are growing exponentially. You should know that, computer power doubling every eighteen months—whadya call it, Murphy's Law?"

"Yeah," I said, not correcting him. "Murphy's Law."

\* \* \*

This time we used a camcorder, an old VHS one Clayton had picked up off eBay, and I set it up while he lanced his fingertips periodically to check his blood sugar. “I’m ready,” he said at last. “And you?”

I’d set the camcorder on a tripod. I was convinced I’d drop it if I tried to hold it as the temporal fireworks began. “Just say when. Do you want to make an introduction?”

“Yeah. Start it.”

I hit Play. Clayton said today’s date, and his goal of 2050, then said, “I couldn’t be doing this without my man Bob Marshall,” as if I were a player in his band. Then: “Now I’m clicking Initiate.”

I dragged in a kitchen chair and again sat so I could see Clayton but not his screen—I had the camcorder for that. His music played, louder this time, more gratifying than before if possible, semitones never heard in Western music and with the disquieting harmonies of the Tuvaluan throat singers but falsetto not bass in pitch; and at the same time having something *like* a melody except this melodic line seemed to progress not toward a peak or moment of release but rather *away* from a resolution. This would have inspired frustration in me if I was not fascinated by the changes in Clayton: hair darkening and double chin vanishing and skin achieving the smooth wrinkle-free glow of youth; soon he looked not just like a young man but a teenager. And it struck me with mathematical certainty he’d be reduced to a child, then an infant, then a blastocyst if I continued to watch, and I was culpable for this regression. Nauseated, I jumped up from the chair, knocking over the VCR, and made it to the bathroom, where I heaved dryly.

“Everything’s gone green,” he said later, not impatient with my dereliction but exuberant, as if he’d just played a show with triple encores. He helped me back to the living room as he chattered. “Green buildings. Kudzu choking the Mississippi. Banana trees in St. Paul. Chlorophyll walls. Chlorophyll pavement. Even the hipsters have done something to their hemoglobin so it’s green not red. They got *green* skin.”

“So they’ve solved climate change.” I picked up the camcorder, rewound it.

“Naw. They’re *adjusting* to it. All the coastal cities are gone. The northern states have united with Canada. There was a civil war but that’s over. People are pulling together.”

I started playing the tape. “And diabetes?”

“They cured it, but there’s a catch.”

“Which is?”

“They give you a vasectomy if you want to be cured.”

“Eugenics. They *are* fascist. So you got a vasectomy?”

“Fuck no! I got the diabetes cure data on the USB drive. And I wrote down important shit on my notebook.”

The tape played through the viewfinder showed Clayton from behind, nodding to the unpleasant music, but not getting any younger.

Well, time was a conscious construct, and the VCR made no claims to consciousness.

“Fuck!” he said.

He showed me his little blue spiral-bound notebook.

Its college-ruled pages were empty.

“I don’t care.” He tapped his head. “I still remember a lot.”

That Friday night, Clayton and his band were playing at Skinny Tie. I was drunk on Long Island Iced Teas and listening to Clayton’s bass line for Grandmaster Flash’s “White Lines (Don’t Do It),” and Trio’s song “Da Da Da” (heavy on the bass). It occurred to me that Clayton was *tweaking* the lines, giving them something mysterious and off-kilter, reminiscent of the music he used to time-travel. As if he meant to take the whole club with him to his diabetes-free fascist future.

I saw a busty girl in a black leather miniskirt and dyed black hair teased up like Siouxsie Sioux's circa '85 and I thought, *Gretchen*. I went to her and started dancing beside her because now in our post-verbal age when you want to dance with someone you don't ask them to dance, you just start dancing and then if they don't turn away, you know they like you. *Gretchen* smiled at me. Ruby-red lips and heavy mascara and round cheeks that I wanted to stroke. "Da Da Da" merged into "Spirit in the Sky," that fuzz-guitar gospel song tonight made even more ironic by Clayton's bass, still Tibetan sounding, off-key and off-beat, and I moved closer to *Gretchen* and as I kissed her I tasted cigarette ash on her breath.

She pushed me. "Gotta go to the bathroom," she said.

As she walked away my face burned red and I realized that she wasn't *Gretchen*. *Gretchen* loathed cigarettes.

And this girl was young enough to be my daughter.

Saturday afternoon, though nursing a hangover, I had myfourthdimension.org on my computer screen and Clayton, behind me, setting up the camcorder. "I made some videos in the eighties, you know. But hardcore bands getting played on MTV, what were the chances of that?"

"There's channels now like MTV6, MTV7, that play weird stuff," I said.

"Recent stuff. 'Retro' bands who think punk started with Greed Day. I don't have cable anyway." He adjusted the focus and the aperture as I clicked through the introductory screens on my web browser. "All this because you want to want to win this girl."

"No. I want to *not* win her. How many times I got to tell you that?"

"I saw you hitting on that Goth chick last night. Looked kinda like *Gretchen*."

I wondered how he could tell that because the photos I had of *Gretchen* in my shrine were from '89, '90, when she had let her hair grow in blond, and braided it. She could have been mistaken for a sorority girl if not for the tie-dye shirt in one photo, the black halter top in the other accentuated by the necklace of little plastic skulls and the diagram of the cocaine molecule, circles connected by bars. I remembered making love to her while she was wearing that shirt and the molecule glowing in the dark as she rocked above me.

"You like your chicks Rubensesque," Clayton said.

"It's that obvious?"

"When one plays White Lines the thousandth time, it gives one the chance to ponder the mating rituals of the clientele." There was a *snap* on the tripod. "Move your chair a couple inches to your right so I get a better shot of the screen. Good. So why not just Google *Gretchen* and find out what she's doing now?"

I shrugged. I didn't want to confirm that I had failed to save her.

"Rubensesque chicks tend to get more Rubensesque as they get older. Big tits and meaty thighs, dude. You might like her even better when she's pushing fifty. And women that age, some of them are as horny as seventeen-year-old boys. I got Viagra, if you need it."

"I don't want to be with her," I said. "I just want to make sure she stays away from the child-me. Because the child-me destroyed her life."

"Kept her in Minnesota instead of the big-time Ivy League career."

"Among other things."

I still hadn't told him how she had died, back in '91.

"Okay," Clayton said. "I'm ready. You want to do an intro?"

I said today's date, and the target date December 3, 1986.

The day I had lost my virginity.

I clicked Initiate.

\* \* \*

Seeing *Brazil* in Chemistry 101 delighted the child-me—the two beers I drank beforehand playing a part no doubt, as well as Gretchen beside me, letting me kiss her hand and brush my cheek against her moussed hair (the mousse smelled of peach, I could still remember, and sitting five rows behind them that memory aroused me—take that, Clayton!) But the movie seemed too slow, pacing glacial compared to *Pick-ups*, and the scene with the driver down the canyon of billboards, so striking in 1986, seemed dull compared to the glossy ranks of giant LCD billboards that now line I-35.

I followed them out into the cool night. Already child-me had taken to wearing the dark trenchcoat in emulation of Gretchen. There'd been a little snow that had melted during the day, then frozen into pools of ice that cracked beneath my feet. There was another crack, too, someone behind me.

"Hello, Frederick," I said.

He wore a punk-style trenchcoat too, and a Minnesota Vikings stocking cap that was practical, if decidedly unhip. "Why are you following them, dude?"

"I know about you, Frederick," I said. "The two semesters of Russian. Father a known Communist. That the KGB has attempted to contact you."

"Huh? I went to a few Socialist Party meetings."

"You talked to people there."

"What is this, 1953? I thought McCarthy was dead."

"You've got talent. We know about your code-breaking algorithms. It's something the NSA could use. I'd hate to hear you'd been arrested for selling them to the Soviets."

He didn't say anything. I knew he hadn't yet developed these algorithms; they were nothing more than musings for him at this time. At last he said, "You're one weird dude. Are you offering me a job?"

"Let's just say you're in the running. But stay away from Bob and Gretchen."

"What the fuck do they have to do with the Soviets?"

"Gretchen's got a path of her own. You got to let her go it alone."

"You mean with Little Bobby Brown-nose?"

I restrained myself from returning his insult. "No, I have to take care of him myself."

He was quiet for a while. "What I think is, you're after Gretchen yourself."

"No," I said. "That's the last thing I want."

But even as I spoke I wondered if I was lying.

They went to a cafe called "My Orphaned Son"—it was crowded with poetasters in tie-dye, and punkers in leather jackets and multicolored hair mohawked or sculpted like topiary bushes, and retro beatniks in red berets and black turtlenecks; and rather than attempt to confront them there or risk having some wit notice my bald head and sing, "Nazi Punks Fuck Off!", I decided to go to Gretchen's apartment, five blocks away. Two story brick building built in the thirties and succumbing to decay: one window boarded over, drained gutter damaged or clogged so icy channels veined their way down one brick wall. The keys still worked. The outer door—into the foyer, whose familiar smell of smoke and mildew and bad cooking put me in mind of imminent sex. And up to the second floor, where Gretchen's apartment was. I knocked, no one answered, and, my heart racing, I turned the key for her door. The deadbolt moved as if newly oiled. I opened the door. I saw the picture of Brahma on a divan, being ministered to by some bare-breasted beauty. I smelled curry and tarragon and fish, and I remembered now how Gretchen, who had been a vegetarian, more to please Frederick than to obey the dictates of her own conscience, had begun to cook me Indian food.

All I knew then was how to bake TV dinners and make macaroni and cheese.

I took a step in, then changed my mind and closed the door and locked it. I'd envi-

sioned myself sitting on her blue rattan and greeting them with some wise obscurity, but my better judgment prevailed. Gretchen would not be impressed by my appearance but terrified; she'd probably call the police. I sat against the wall across from her doorway. I took off my coat to cover my lap. I had an erection. And like an undergrad math geek I did calculus derivations to force the blood back up into my brain.

"It's the guy Fred punched!"

It was Gretchen who'd spoken. I'd fallen asleep, apparently. I looked up. They smelled of second-hand cigarette smoke, from their clothes and hair. In those days all clubs sanctioned smoking. "It's the guy who took me to the funk club!"

"I thought you said he was a hippie," she said.

"His hair was long," child-me said.

She peered at me. "What's Gore-Lieberman 2000 mean?"

It was a gamble I had taken. An old T-shirt from that travesty of an election. My weight-gain from anti-depressant drugs had made it uncomfortably tight. "Bobby didn't believe me when I told him who I was."

"He said he was me," child-me said.

Gretchen seemed interested. "You're a Gore-Lieberman 2000? Is that a robot model?"

"No." I explained about the election. "I campaigned for them."

"So you're saying you're from the future?"

"Right. I'm Bobby. Twenty-six years from now."

"Total B.S.," child-me said. "Let's call the cops."

"Or Bob," I said. "I really hated being called Bobby when I was young."

She took Bobby's hand and stared at his palm, then took my hand and stared at it too. "This is weird shit," she said.

"You don't believe in palmistry," both of us said simultaneously.

She looked at Bobby. She looked at me. "Your lifelines are the same." A cautious woman would have asked me to leave the building, but having made a decision, Gretchen was not cautious. "Then let's go inside and hear what you have to say."

Gretchen and Bobby sat together on the puffy green love seat. A new addition for them: I vaguely remembered helping her lug it up the stairs. It seemed much larger in my memory. They held hands. Her hair, though still Cure-like, was growing in blond. Child-me had affected an earring, a little silver snap-on loop. They were taking the first steps in resembling each other, as couples sometimes do. I burned with jealousy. Gretchen, as if to break the tension, said, "Can I get you guys something to drink?"

"Yeah, please."

"Screwdriver okay?"

I'd forgotten that I'd started drinking screwdrivers when I met Gretchen. As a way to impress her. She drank red wine usually, mixed drinks seldom, beer never; she thought the story that an ounce of alcohol would kill ten thousand brain cells was unsubstantiated nonsense, but still, she drank only in moderation. As I must do now. "Make mine weak," I said.

"Liver can't handle it?" Bobby asked.

"Brain can't handle it," I said.

When she was in the kitchen Bobby said to me, "So you're going to tell me to leave her alone, aren't you?"

"No. Do what you want. Only, when she wins the Fulbright, let her go. Or go with her even. Because if she stays here—she'll die."

"Huh?" he asked. "She has to win the Fulbright to live?"

She returned before I could answer. I looked so hard at her gray gold-flecked eyes I misjudged the glass she was handing me and I nearly spilled it in my lap. She

laughed, then sat down. Bobby stared at me. His screwdriver was so strong it looked like lemonade.

Above me was Brahma, he of the red lips and blue skin and kohl-lined eyes; above Gretchen and Bobby a framed picture of the Cure, all tousled hair and white-face. At twenty I thought her unspeakably cool; now I wondered if she just had a fascination with men in makeup. Still I was trembling as I drank. My screwdriver could have been mistaken for orange juice gone sour.

“So you’re a time traveler,” she said, finally.

I looked at her bookcase; there were a few paperback volumes of Asimov, Heinlein, Dick, and Silverberg, but mostly work by the Great Victorians, John Stuart Mill, H.G. Wells, Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and Louis Agassiz, all the whiskered stiff-collared sages of the nineteenth century, those who were on the way to systemizing nature, reducing all the world’s workings to a few dozen linear equations before first Einstein and then the quantum theorists had rendered their work archaic. The bottom shelf featured a series of abstruse mathematical textbooks.

“He’s an NSA spook,” Bobby said. “He knows all kinds of stuff about me.”

Gretchen sipped at her wine, staring at me. I knew she was calculating, but to be scrutinized that way after twenty years by the woman that I loved made my blood pound in my ears. She said, “You sound like Bob. You look like you could be his uncle. But anyone who knew how to use a computer modem could find his life story from government and marketing databases.”

“The Man knows us better than we know ourselves,” I said.

She said with a shrug, “I guess you could say that.” I thought she’d have been more surprised; it had been a catch phrase between us. But maybe later in our relationship. She said, “What’s my middle name?”

“Just an initial S. Not standing for anything. Like Harry S Truman.” I took a big swallow of the weak screwdriver. “Though sometimes you said Savant. And sometimes I said Sexy.”

Bobby turned beet-red.

She looked at my Gore-Lieberman shirt. “Who did I vote for in ’84?”

“Nobody,” I said. “You supported Jesse Jackson. You were in the hospital anyway.”

She had told me once that Jackson’s failure to gain the Democratic nomination combined with Reagan’s overwhelming win over Mondale had sunk her into a depression so deep that she’d almost had to drop out of school. I believed that it was the disappointment of not getting into grad school at either Caltech or Berkeley plus the move from the Bay Area (she’d grown up in Sausalito, gone to Stanford for undergrad) that played a bigger role. I didn’t mention this theory, though.

Bobby stroked her forearm. “Hospitals have computer databases too. Or he could have talked to somebody in Campus Democrats.”

She ignored him. “Take off your shirt.”

“Gretch!” Bobby said.

“I’m just curious.”

I pulled off the shirt, aware of my flabby gut, my hairy man breasts, how DNA’s mortal coil could so quickly turn something slender into something fat. Well, I could blame the anti-depressants.

“He blushes just like you,” she said. Then she lifted Bobby’s sweater to expose his navel.

“Hey!” he said.

“You both have it,” she said.

She meant the appendectomy scar, the misshapen pucker like a second navel just above my waistline. The GP at the clinic outside Morehead saved my life that warm evening in the summer of ’75, but didn’t have the skills to stitch me back together properly.

It was with relief that I pulled my shirt back on.

"So you believe?" I asked.

She looked at me. Her heavily mascaraed eyes had the directness and intensity my reptilian brain took for sexual—my balls tingled—but which my cortex remembered was a sign of concentration. Still, I felt a test had been passed. She asked me some more questions. What her childhood cat's name had been (a white cat called Pepper); how her grandmother had died (a stroke while climbing a staircase in the Smithsonian's oldest building). More questions, incredibly easy ones it seemed, the kind you might use as password reminders on a website.

But of course Gretchen had never heard of the World Wide Web.

She served us both, me and Bobby, a second screwdriver. I started to feel drunk. Then she asked if we should listen to music.

We both said, "Sure, Liszt," then giggled, spraying orange juice out our nostrils.

She shook her head. "What would you rather hear, you rock and rollers?"

"Do you have *Tones on Tail* yet?" I asked. "The album with 'Go' on it?"

"Okay," she said.

She took out an LP. Clayton would approve. I watched her placing the LP on the turntable, her long pale fingers lowering the stylus in a gesture that seemed like a benediction. As one of the songs played, something synth-heavy and dreamy, she mused about Occam's Razor, about how the simplest explanation, that I was a NSA spook, was probably the right one, and doesn't time flow in one direction only, didn't it *have* to? Wouldn't paradoxes accumulate so quickly otherwise the universe would become absurd, nondeterministic and indecipherable? Wouldn't there be an infinite number of time travelers?

She asked her questions in a soft yet insistent way that suited the quiet music.

Bobby was nodding sleepily in agreement.

"Ah, but time isn't linear," I said. The music served equally well for the mystical arguments that I'd read on the website. "Time and causality are a set of frames tied together by human consciousness."

"Consciousness," she said. "Can you prove to me your consciousness exists?"

"I think, therefore I am," I said, lamely.

Then the song "Go!," *Tones on Tail*'s one hit, which I knew even by '86 had long been a club standard, began. And I remembered why I had suggested it. "Go," I said.

"Go to London. When you win the Fulbright, go to London."

She turned pale. "How'd you know I was thinking about the Fulbright?"

Stupidly I sang along with the song, the lyric about never getting old.

The beat fast-forwarded me a quarter century.

In a comfortable room, fat youth sat in a circle, discussing their problems.

It was a rehab of some sort, a therapy group for heavyset teenagers, and my abrupt arrival caused even the adult woman who was leading the group to drop her pen as she stared at me. Indeed, all just stared as if hypnotized as I made my way from the copy machine in the corner toward the door. Evidently, ghosts cause not screams, but silence.

I saw the same hallways as in 1986, but painted lemon yellow, not beige. And there were now posters—one of the food pyramid, one on alcohol's effect on coordination and memory—confirming the rehab nature of the place. Outside the night was starry and so cold my lungs burned. I realized that I had been drunk just a few minutes before but was now clear-headed. Or, more accurately: I was drunk twenty-six years ago. That's a long time to sober up.

But this was unchanged: twenty-six years later I still loved Gretchen.

\* \* \*

When I got home, I saw Clayton reclined on my couch, holding a sirloin steak to his temple.

“I thought you were vegan,” I said.

“Fuck you,” he whispered.

“What happened?” I said.

“Tornado. Hit my head.”

Watery blood ran down his arm; the steak had thawed. He let me take it. He had a welt on his head that looked cartoonish, bullet-shaped and half an inch high. “We should get you to the ER.”

“No. No hospitals. I don’t want to have to explain the tornado.”

“There was a tornado again?”

He gestured toward the living room. It looked no different, computer playing the colored boxes screensaver, pile of unread mail on my desk. The only evidence of anything but the usual mild disheveledness was that the camcorder stand had fallen, along with the camcorder. I put the steak back in the freezer, then stood the camcorder stand upright. The camcorder itself I brought to Clayton.

“Maybe you hit your head on it and knocked it over.”

“I know what tornados feel like, Adventure Boy. Watch it.”

Rewound, flipped open the screen, hit play. Then I saw myself, then a blur or belch in the tape, then a couple of seconds where I’m gone, then another belch and darkness.

Whatever that proved.

“You haven’t fixed it, have you?” asked Clayton.

“What? The camcorder?”

“No, dumbass. Your girlfriend.” He pointed toward the shrine.

He was right. The pictures were still there. Maybe there was some difference. The topless shot at the beach in Portugal: she had looked vulnerable, not aggressive, before. So I thought.

She was just as dead as she had been before.

“How did you know it was about her?”

“You think you’re secretive, Loverboy. But you’re as easy to read as an open book.”

Monday morning, I slept through my alarm, and arrived at work close to ten A.M., half an hour late. A strange man was sitting in my cubicle.

Close-cropped blond hair, white Oxford shirt, blue tie; nothing of the artist-wannabee look about him. Maybe he was IT, installing software on my computer. I stood just outside my cubicle, watching him type, waiting for him to notice me. Finally, when it was clear that he was too involved with his task to acknowledge my presence, I knocked on the cubicle.

He looked up at me. “Yes? Can I help you?”

“Yeah, uh, I think you are sitting at my desk.”

“What? Who are you?”

“Bob. Robert Marshall.”

“Good to meet you, Bob.” The man smiled at me patronizingly. “The thing is, Bob, I think you’re confused. I’ve been sitting here for a week now.”

“I’m not confused,” I said. Something tickled me, at the base of my brain, at the font of my consciousness. “You’re in my seat.”

“No, I don’t think this is your cubicle.”

“Are you fucking with me, sir?”

The man stopped smiling. I was aware that I was speaking rudely, that other people in the office were watching us, that Stacey was rushing in this direction from the

opposite side of the sea of cubicles. And then I remembered that ten days ago Stacey had fired me.

I had memories of working here last week but they were now like the memories of dreams.

I hurried away before Stacey could reach me.

"You don't remember all the talks we had last week?" Clayton asked that afternoon.

"I do, yeah . . ."

"Aren't you worried about money?"

"Money? Not worried about money. Worried about *Gretchen*."

"I don't know if you should go back again. If you're right, you're already changing people's lives."

"I haven't changed hers. Not enough."

"Well, it's my turn."

So I let him: May first 2055, music like a woman's crying played backward over a snare drum and metal brush chink-chink-ka-chink-a-chink, played loudly to ensure the time he'd spend would be long enough for accomplishment; and flicker, the young man, the older man, the child and the shrunken geriatric, and the fear and nausea the visions inspired in me so that I was compelled to close my eyes. Then as my eyes closed—foreboding, hairs going erect on the nape of my neck—the perception of the tornado he had told me about. Sharp ozone smell suggested imminent violence. I breathed deep so I wouldn't vomit. There seemed a crescendo of sensations, ozone, nausea—then—

—brightness through my eyelids.

I rested while the purple images squirmed, consolidated, decomposed. Then I opened my eyes.

"Back from the dead," Clayton said.

"Huh?"

"You were conked out. I had to shake you. I worried you'd gone time tripping and then went comatose."

"It didn't work for you?"

"It was fine. I got into the emergency room, got a five-day regimen of mimetic insulin, applied for a Triage Card, got it after a day, made an appointment for May 18 to receive a permanent cure."

"Five days. But you were gone—" I looked at my watch. "Twenty minutes."

"Duration of sojourn proportional to energy of music," he quoted from the web site.

I looked at him carefully. His skin looked brighter. The crow's feet and the creases between his nostrils and the corners of his mouth seemed softer. "You look good," I said. "But isn't it going to degrade, you know? The insulin."

"Not so quickly. They made the insulin from stem cells in my bone marrow. My immune system won't reject it."

"Let's hope not," I said. My sense of foreboding was in sharp contrast to his optimism.

"Hey, sourpuss, let's go get a beer!"

We went to 7-11 and bought a six-pack of Solora, beer I'd never heard of, then we stopped at Dairy Queen where we both got banana splits with extra Maraschino cherries. Then we climbed to the roof of Clayton's building and watched the downtown skyline. It was an unusually balmy night for Minneapolis in February, in the 40s, and we ate ice cream and watched lights aglow in the office buildings and the green arcs of the Hennepin Avenue suspension bridge and the neon Viking horned

helmet atop the Norwest Bank tower. I told Clayton I didn't remember the giant helmet.

"Of course you don't. We're changing things. We're changing history. Going back. Going forward. Haven't you ever had *déjà vu* before?"

"Sure," I said. I sipped Solara. It tasted like Corona. "Like you're reliving something you *know* you never lived."

"It's the same damn thing. *Déjà vu*'s where someone else has messed with the timeline, altered history in a subtle way so what you remember you confuse for something new."

The ice cream went well with beer. "If you say so."

"I *know* so. You gonna go back and fix your Gretchen problem?"

"I just got to make sure she goes with me—child-me—to London."

"Then do it. Quit whining. Kick your own twenty-year-old ass if you need to make it happen."

"Don't you worry about paradox?"

"Time's just a bunch of monads. We break the ties between some, then we make new ties. Afterward all the instances make just as much sense as the ones before. It always happens. We're writing stories continuously. Most memories are false. Even without time travel." He raised his beer as if to toast the heavens. "Drink up."

I drank my beer. The cold beer and the ice cream gave me a sharp headache, but the sugar seemed to counteract the alcohol to give me the illusion of sobriety. We started on our second beers, Clayton's putting him into a mood where he talked about the great expansion of social consciousness that started about 2040, when finally even the capitalists admitted that they were going to destroy the Earth if they didn't rethink their approach to consumerism, how the philosophy of growth for growth's sake would drive the species to extinction, how even then some still "worshipped Mammon and Ayn Rand," and *that* caused the Civil War, not the terrorists or the Russians or the Chinese or the Aryan Freedom Front, and the only nuclear bombs that were dropped were on a few cities, on Houston and Tulsa and Atlanta in the South, and Boston and San Francisco and Newark in the north. Clayton spoke with satisfaction, as if it were a good thing that so few bombs had been dropped, that it was millions and not tens of millions that had died.

"And Minneapolis?"

"M-town thrived," Clayton said.

I was horrified. "We did it, you and I, playing with time?"

"Drops in the bucket, my poor guilt-ridden fuck. The flapping of a butterfly's wings when there are a trillion other butterflies. Drink your beer."

I drank my second beer, and then my third. The night seemed warm. The glittering buildings downtown seemed to double, as if I were seeing one possible future just barely misaligned with another.

"Save your girlfriend, and quit whining," Clayton said to me.

### **Early October, 1988.**

The air crisp, leaves crunching underfoot. The crowds of proto-yuppies on the quad, interspersed with pink-haired leather-jacketed punks and dreadlocked granolas in alpaca sweaters and Birkenstocks. How quickly the old categories came back to mind. But the categories merged. All were excited. The Reverend Jesse Jackson had come to speak, to lift the apathetic out of the cynical doldrums born of eight years of Ronald Reagan and his cronies, Ollie North and James Watt and Michael Milken and murdered nuns in El Salvador. And all the rest of that decade whose faults, so grim then, seem just period color when held against the nightmares that would come two decades later.

I think I was having my first depressive episode that summer. I had graduated and I was sending out resumes but I didn't have a job. Much of the country did not share in the fruits of the Reagan Revolution. I didn't want to move to LA or San Fran or NYC where there might be more jobs. There was a software company in Minneapolis that did computer post-production for ads, graphics for news shows and sports segments. They were coming to campus in late October and I wanted to assemble a portfolio to show them. I hadn't begun.

Gretchen was starting to fill out the form for the Fulbright.

We heard Jesse. The man spoke magic. Even the Young Republicans in their Izod shirts and khaki pants seemed mesmerized. I was excited too, but tempered by my knowledge, that Dukakis would not win, that George Bush and his pinhead Dan Quayle, conservative darling of the Moral Majority, would eke out a narrow victory.

Unless they didn't, unless my presence altered history somehow.

I saw Gretchen.

She sat with child-me, Bobby, on a stone windowsill six feet up the side of the Botany Building, so we could see over the heads of the crowd. I remember being both exulted and terrified: one effect of depression for me is a heightened, almost crazed, sense of physical danger.

Her hair was all blonde now and cut short so it didn't even reach her shoulders. Mine no mullet: ledged in back, flopping (if I let it) to my lips in front: my Echo and the Bunnymen look. I edged my way in their direction. I thought Gretchen glanced my direction but wasn't sure.

Reverend Jackson was leading the crowd in a call-and-response.

Bowel-looseningly thrilling, spine-chilling, Jackson cajoled, remonstrated, persuaded that these times were just as important as the sixties and the fight against apartheid and the threat of US imperialism in Latin America was as crucial as the struggle for civil rights and against the Vietnam war had been. And Dukakis was not Bush-with-a-D. Jackson was encouraging us to register so we could vote when someone grabbed my shoulder.

It was Frederick. Reeking of pot, dreadlocks instead of a tail, three-day growth of beard, eyes bloodshot. "You're not from the NSA, either," Frederick said. "I just got a letter inviting me to consider joining them. Do you think I'm a fool?"

"Did I ever say you were?"

"I think you're somebody like G. Gordon Liddy with that shaved head."

"Wrong political party."

"Whatever. You've screwed up my life with that twerp." He thrust a finger at Bobby. "The kid's as shallow and selfish as a sorority girl. He's trying to guilt-trip her into delaying the Fulbright application for a year."

"He's got a good heart. He'll grow a lot in the next few years."

"How do you know? Wait—don't answer. I know how you'll know. You're from the future. The Bobby gone old. Well, what do you think about temporal paradox, Bobby? What if you were to kill little Bobby? Then you can't exist to have come back to kill him."

"Bertrand Russell says time is a collection of monads, each instance connected probabilistically to a network—"

"—of possible futures and pasts," Frederick said, loud and sarcastic enough that a girl in a long black sweater gave us a dirty look.

"You've been reading?"

"Topology and the Kabala," Frederick said. "*The Area 51 Report. The Late Great Planet Earth.*"

"You're making fun of me," I said.

"Funny you'd talk that way. You're the one who took my girlfriend. How'd you do

it? Was your time travel shit real? I've read about the research into time travel the CIA ran under the Nixon White House. Were you part of that?"

"I was eight years old when Nixon resigned," I said.

"So you say."

"All I want is for her to go to London on the Fulbright."

"So you can follow her there? Make love to her in a bedsit in Fulham?"

"See ya later, Freddie the Great," I said.

Jesse Jackson had finished his speech and was being led away by aides as a knot of people followed him. He had also encouraged the apathetic to register to vote; and Bobby had jumped from the windowsill (even now I could remember the terror at the six-foot fall into the soft-petaled jasmine below). Chivalrously, he helped Gretchen down. They didn't follow the horde in Jackson's wake but the other group, heading toward the Coffman Student Union building, where volunteers had set up registration tables for voting.

I followed them into the Student Union.

It was like a trade show for politics, mostly liberal. Greenpeace posters, displays for Mother Jones and the Sierra Club and Planned Parenthood, disturbing shots of the first Palestinian Intifada, all set up behind card tables. The political parties were sitting cheek-to-jowl, the Socialist Workers of America next to the Democrats next to the Republicans, next to Jesse's Rainbow Coalition. Conversations between the opposing camps might have been spirited except that the queues at each table kept the partisans running the booths busy. Each party was registering voters.

"Jesse should still run," Gretchen said. "As an independent."

"Too much racism in the United States," Bobby said. "I can't see a black president until all the Dixiecrats are dead."

I wanted to kick him. Not because five election cycles from now he would be proved wrong. But because he had no reason to puncture her upbeat mood with something akin to the cynical thoughts that had put her into the hospital.

"It's you!" she said to me. "Future man."

"How are things in 2525?" Bobby said bitterly. "The men folk still alive? The woman trying to survive?"

"We built this future on rock and roll," I sang, just as inanely, a variation on the Starship song.

He snorted, and I felt doubly embarrassed. It is lame to laugh at your own joke.

The kid between us in line, good Swedish stock, shoulder-length hair of yellow so bright as to contrast with the red of his Che Guevera T-shirt, obviously took me for a crazy man and slipped out of line to join the queue for the socialists.

"So how—how have you been?" I asked them.

"You know," Bobby said.

Despite his having laughed a moment before, I saw the sadness in his eyes, the way his eyelids drooped, which was so familiar in depressives. "You seeing anybody?"

I'd meant at Student Health, but he took Gretchen's hand. "We're engaged," he said.

"Congratulations," I said. I looked at the fingers of her left hand.

"No," she said. "Engagement rings are emblems of the patriarchy. Signifiers of ownership."

"They'd also piss off Frederick the Great," Bobby said.

Then they looked at each other, silently conferring. They were close in a way I could barely remember: when blinks could signal assent or surprise, when stares spoke volumes.

"We're planning an official engagement party for New Year's Eve," she said.

"And we'd like to invite you," Bobby said.

"Cool. Send me an e-mail."

"Huh?" Bobby said.

"Oh," I said. "Is there still that big announcement board, people trying to sell things and get trips and stuff?"

"Over there," Bobby said, pointing to a bulletin board, near the student travel service office, and crammed with postcards and push-pinned pieces of paper.

"Leave me a note. Address it to Robert in block letters. Tell me where to meet you."

"You could call us."

But this was before cell phones. And we had never had an answering machine in the eighties. "I'll try calling. But leave a note just in case."

They looked at each other and nodded. Maybe they thought I was a harmless crank. Maybe they believed who I said I was and rather than freaking out about it, took heart in it. Or maybe Gretchen, curious and analytical to an extent I could appreciate but not equal, saw me as a science experiment.

She'd reached the front of the line and as she leaned over to fill out the voter registration form, I noticed that while her haircut might be boyish, the way she filled her skirt certainly was not.

Bobby noticed me staring at her ass, and distracted me by showing the friendship bracelet he'd gotten just two months before. Wool, threads dyed silver and gold. "Each of us got one. They stand for engagement."

"Yeah, sure," I said.

I remembered buying the same pair at Four Corners from an old Navajo and how what he had said to us was, "Now you are friends forever."

I said goodbye to them. No point in trying to register to vote with proof of residence a driver's license set to expire in 2014. Not that I *objected* to sticking around until November. My heart was beating fast. I still wanted Gretchen. I was half-disappointed there was talk of engagement, half-thrilled. Maybe it had worked. Maybe I had changed the timeline; or adjusted the connectivity of the possible instances. Maybe Gretchen would go to London and I, despite being afraid of change or maybe with the bravery that only the innocent and untested can know, would follow her. Maybe Gretchen would go to London and young Bobby would fall into a despair so deep he'd need hospitalization and I, old me, would be the one who would go to London with her.

I was hungry and got a turkey sandwich and a Coke. I hoped to digest the food in time before I'd return to the future. The sorority-type girl, ponytail so yellow she could have been the Che-shirt-wearing boy's sister, turned dramatically away from me as though to emphasize that she did not want to chance my striking up a conversation about the copy of *Candide* she was reading.

I scanned the big cafeteria, looking for Gretchen. They were *engaged*. Something she and I had talked about, discussed seriously, then stopped talking about that summer of '88 when I had not had the intellectual energy to complete my senior project, in computer compilers. Nor the creativity to imagine any future.

I remember her telling me even Dukakis had been once been hospitalized for depression successfully, so why not at least go to the Student Health Center?

Just entering the cafeteria from a far off hallway I saw a girl that could be Gretchen—short blonde hair, denim dress—and I thought of following her, going to her apartment. They'd still be in the same apartment as in '86. I could wait until night when I knew Bobby would bicycle off to the computer lab, to work on his compiler for GRETCHEN: GRaphically Enhanced TeaCHing ENgine.

But the girl was not Gretchen; she wore a long sweater that said ESPRIT and her square-jawed face was heavily made up. She picked an empty table and I followed her to it anyway. She did not acknowledge me as I sat beside her.

"So here you are," Frederick said. He nodded toward the girl, said to me, "Are you enjoying your stay in this the best of all possible worlds?"

The girl flashed him a look, picked up her backpack and book, and coolly walked away.

"You are as charming as ever, Freddie," I said.

"She was an airhead, Bob-bob. A sorority bitch."

"Not one of the enlightened ones. Not one who smokes ganja so he can vision the great Ras Tafari."

"Is it better to be a good Lutheran, praying every Sunday morning to a god that has no visual aspect at all?"

I shrugged. I wanted to finish my sandwich and follow Gretchen before Freddie made me angry.

"And what's with your shaved head?" he asked. "Are you a skinhead?"

"Male-pattern baldness," I said. "The comb-over wasn't getting me the babes."

He laughed. "You're funnier now. Tell me, will Dukakis win?"

I shrugged. "Stuff changes every time I come back here. Paradoxes multiply. If I tell you what happens, I might affect the outcome unpredictably."

"Don't fuck with me. Bet the right way, you and I could make a lot of money."

A thought struck me. "Promise to stay away from Gretchen, I'll tell you a couple of things."

He squinted at me with his bloodshot eyes. Too much pot might have kept him a lecturer at the U of M instead of an associate professor at MIT, but he was still shrewd. "You could fuck with me, tell me anything. And I know it's all monads, instances threaded together by our consciousnesses. So even if you told me the truth, it might not matter. Threads could reweave, monads can bifurcate."

"You've been reading," I said. The mayonnaise of 1988 tasted better than that of 2012; no corn syrup? The Coke tasted better, too.

"More than reading. I've been doing some experiments through the auspices of the psych department. Split-wave experiments. The interface between consciousness and quantum effects. I'm trying to think up a protocol for the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen effect. Spooky action at a distance. If I can get it to work, that'll prove time-travel is a necessary correlate."

"You're getting grants for *this*?"

"Applying. I'm working with a Prof in the physics department, a chick in the Psychology department. Cross-discipline; that's what's cool now."

I remembered how Gretchen had hated how he would call women, even full professors, "chicks."

"So what about it?" he said.

"You'll leave Gretchen alone. And me, young Bobby, too?"

He shrugged. "If you want to rob the cradle."

"It's not for *this* me, asshole."

"I saw you staring at her."

I was angry. "Two things. First, invest everything you have in Microsoft."

"This from a guy whose senior project is a windowing system for elementary kids? Named after the chick he stole from me?"

I stood up. "Second. Dukakis is going to win big, you piece of white-assed Rastafarian shit."

He charged at me. I think I got in a good punch before the world went dark.

I had planned ahead this time. I'd parked my Honda in the big student lot south of the Student Union. It was warm in the afternoon. Maybe Indian summer. No. I'd left October '88 behind me. It was February, and hot. I saw a trio of girls wearing bras

and baggy shorts. One girl had a tarantula tattooed on her shoulder. As I crossed the parking lot, air shimmering, asphalt heat-softened, nausea hit me and I vomited against the side of a Ford Exploiter. I threw up stiff dark things like scraps of rubber. They were solid enough to set off the Ford's car alarm.

My sandwich hadn't had time to digest, apparently.

I thought my car was gone. But no, it had changed color, from blue to red, and added a rear despoiler. What if I *could* change events, but only the most trivial ones? A rear despoiler on a Honda was one more symbol of American excess and stupidity: no Honda could drive fast enough for the despoiler to have its intended effect. I remembered eco-obsessive Clayton of all people arguing for me to get the red car, just to change my staid image. I remembered insisting on the used 2005 blue sedan instead, the practical choice; but that memory was fading to dream. I got into the car, rolled down the windows because the steering wheel was hot enough to burn.

I wrote in my notebook "blue Honda -> red Honda. Warm February now hot."

But maybe I'd changed the climate, too. *That* wouldn't be trivial.

That thought buoyed me.

If I could change the climate, surely I could change Gretchen's fate.

We drank at Traxx. My second beer. A dance song by a group called Munchhausen's Synth-Drum played on the jukebox. I didn't remember the song, but Clayton did. "You're changing the past, man. Reconnecting the monads. You look happier than I've ever seen you."

"If I'd really changed the past, wouldn't Gretchen be with me now?"

"That's a bigger thing than the Fulbright, dumb-ass."

It seemed to me Clayton's cursing became milder each time we time-traveled. The next-best thing to saving Gretchen.

Right.

"You want to do her, don't you? Want to do the nasty?"

"Yeah. And settle down and have kids."

"But is it you?" He sipped his Anchor Steam. He looked older than he had: puffy-faced, pale, sixty or older. "Or is it Baby Bobby you're hoping Gretchen will fall for?"

"Doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters. You're going to try to save her if Baby Bobby fucks it up. That's obvious."

I denied it, even as I fantasized what it would be like to stroke the soft hairs on her thigh.

"Hey Jodi," Clayton said.

"Hey Clayton," the barkeep said, not looking up from the glasses she was drying.

"Two P.M. two days from now we're playing a free concert at Loring Park. Opening for the Exurbs."

"Wow. A free outdoor concert. In winter."

"It's been so warm. Anyway, a big guy with shaved head and tribal tattoos runs security near the bandstand. Mention my name and he'll make sure you get a good place to sit."

"I'll think about it."

Clayton remembered me. "You can come too. You know him, don't you?"

"Samoan guy named Marion," I said. "Yeah."

"You and Jodi could go together."

"I don't know."

Jodi said, "Afraid of cooties?"

I blushed. She laughed. Then she wrote her cell number on the back of a coaster. "Call me if you're interested."

When she'd walked away, I said, "You're setting me up for a date? What the hell?"

"No," Clayton said. "More for me. Because I need to go to 2055 as soon as possible. My toes on my good foot are numb. I'm going to lose them too pretty soon."

"So what's the concert and Jodi have to do with it?"

"I want to get cured. I think if I have two observers, my chances of retaining the changes will be better. And think of how many at the concert will see it."

I know where he had gotten that idea. From one of the essays on myfourthdimension.org. But the notion hadn't been tested. "You want to be a guinea pig."

"I want to be cured, man. This thing is going to kill me." He winked. "And remember, 'Duration of sojourn proportional to energy of music.'"

Later that night, as I was rereading the tracts on myfourthdimension.org, changing the travel date to 12/31/1988 but not clicking Initiate, an e-mail came:

From: exmachina@myfourthdimension.org.

Subject: Many Mansions, Many Keys

You are not the only traveler, you know. Others follow in your timesteps or via threads unknown. Others obsess over beauty and would challenge the integrity of the universe for a kiss. The universe will survive. But the connections between monads will fray, twist, unloosen then tie the wrong events together. The more meddling the more chaos. Don't chase a chick. Don't think with your prick. Chronological thermodynamics will be your undoing.

Magic is another word for a-causality.

The healthy mind accepts Paradox but the insane attempts to resolve it.

Peace.

Could this be Clayton, fucking with me? Or maybe young Bobby? Maybe we had existentially split apart and never reintegrated and he'd grown old and bitter and this was some kind of vengeance.

I didn't like the threatening tone, however mild or implicit it was.

I stayed up past midnight cloning myfourthdimension.org onto my machine. The client-side pages were easy, but the server-side proved harder. I'm not much of a hacker, but I know the easiest routes to get through to the various ports that open when you're running ASP software. Finally I tried a direct route, opening a shell to the server and using Bobby as my username and as my password, Gretchen.

I was in.

I copied the website entirely to my hard drive.

Then I called Clayton. He didn't answer; probably he had a gig.

Impulsively I dialed Jodi.

"What?" In the background, I could hear "I Wear My Sunglasses at Night" playing on the jukebox.

"It's Bob, Clayton's buddy. You gave me your phone number."

"Oh, that. It was like I'd given you a hemlock cocktail, you were so excited."

She sounded more tired than tetchy. I said, "Sorry. I was just hoping you'd want to go to the concert Saturday with me."

"Okay. But I can't stay through the main act. I've got a 7 P.M. shift."

Friday I spent time ego surfing. Or would that be alter-ego surfing? I Googled Robert Jonathan Marshall, Bob Marshall, some variations. There was a Rob Marshall who'd been a semi-famous surfer and been killed off Waikiki in 1998. A guy who was a relative of the inventor of the Marshall amp. A linebacker in the NFL. A coach of a college basketball team. A grunge-core rap artist. Several minor Canadian politicians. An Australian pool champion, deceased. The usual mention of GRETCHEN,

entered by some computer geek determined to record the names of every piece of software ever devised. And the familiar mention of me as a post-production editor for the reality show *Pickups*, "now in its fourth season."

If there'd been another Robert Jonathan Marshall separate from me, he'd kept a low profile.

I typed in Gretchen's full name in the search box but dared not hit Return.

It was an overcast February day in the teens (or in the fifties; I had dreamlike memories of the Fahrenheit scale once being the one commonly used; perhaps another trivial change I'd effected). I drove Jodi to Loring Park, conscious of her gray sweater and tight jeans and dark suede boots, but mostly of her perfume, which was reminiscent enough of Gretchen's to arouse me. I wondered if Clayton had put her up to wearing it.

She did look forty in the daylight, though her auburn hair, a shade darker than Gretchen's, had an appealing gloss.

"You don't talk much sober, do you?" she said as we were directed to a parking space on the big dirt lot beside the bandstand.

"It's just . . ." I said. "What's Clayton told you?"

"To be nice to you. Like I'm an escort or something. That you've had a hard time and need something nice to happen to you."

"He said that?" As if I were looking for a prostitute. "He didn't say anything about a website?"

She laughed. "Oh, *that*. I looked at it this morning. It's a joke, right?"

"We're taking it seriously. I lost my job because of it already."

She looked at me with sympathy. "Now, that I can believe."

We'd brought umbrellas. It was raining softly. The crowd was bigger than I'd have imagined, given the weather. As we threaded our way toward the bandstand, I gave an account of my time travel adventures. And Clayton's.

"*Folie à deux*," she said.

"Could be," I said.

It took longer than I'd expected to find Marion, the security guard; he was wearing a yellow rain poncho, hood up. "You in luck," he said. We got to sit in the second row, on chairs, and underneath the bandshell so we would be protected from the rain.

Bass in hand, Clayton limped across the stage. His toes were clearly hurting him; I thought he might actually use the bass as a crutch. The rest of the band—singer Andrew Sisterless, Mitch the lead guitarist, and Jillian who played synths—seemed concerned too, watching him as though anticipating his collapse and the subsequent gurney-ride across the stage. But Clayton faced the crowd bravely, then said, "We're Hier Mode, and we got a timeless show for you today." There was a big white sheet hanging behind the band, and computer graphics began projecting on the sheet as the music began: rough networks, like the skeletal frames used as the first approximation of animations. They had an undulating quality that reminded me of the time-travel software, the pulsating, spiraling, mutating fractal blobs I was used to seeing.

*Was he trying to send the crowd through time?*

No, the music wasn't right. They sang Simple Minds' "30 Frames a Second," which was about getting younger, and "88 Seconds," by OMD; "The Shape of Things to Come," that sixties chestnut, and "Time After Time," Jillian taking Cindy Lauper's role. And then "Mesopotamia," the B-52s' quirky paean to ancient Sumer. None of it worked, none of it carried the crowd, even in the sense of leading them on the same emotional journey. Partly it was the variety of the songs—some famous, some obscure, most of it the disparate moods and styles. Partly it was the wind that was kicking up the rain, soaking those in the rows behind us, rippling the big sheet as though

to negate whatever temporal effects its images might induce. And face it, most people who want to hear eighties covers want danceable pop confections, not sermons.

The only success was “All Tomorrow’s Parties,” the Velvet Underground’s haunting classic, from the sixties, for sure, but covered by so many bands in the eighties it could qualify as an eighties song. Clayton and Jillian sang as a duet, his baritone harmonizing with her high alto, the mix somehow working, the two of them together as chilling as Nico had been alone. It seemed to me I could see for a moment the digits 2055 flashed on the screen, wavering and insubstantial, and I could feel the emotion like *déjà-vu* that signals the paradoxical recognition of the novel not the familiar. I saw others dancing, and some of them turning green in shards of sunlight, and as I took Gretchen’s hand—

Feedback and an amp blew out.

“That was weird,” Gretchen—no, Jodi, said. She was still holding my hand. The crowd was in shock, freaked out. A teenage girl was crying. A pot-bellied guy was rubbing his temple and repeating, “Eat me, Buddha, eat me, Buddha.” Onstage there was someone else—a roadie maybe, a middle-aged dude bald on top with long blond reggae locks and the kind of red weathered face men get from constant exposure to sun and wind and alcohol.

I’d seen him before. A year ago. The night I’d first met Clayton in the club. He’d been wearing a big Rasta cap that night. He’d called himself Ziggy Gellman.

And I’d seen him, oh, how I’d seen him, years ago as well.

I let go of Jodi’s hand.

“Where you going?”

“That’s Frederick the Great. I got to talk to him.”

A teenager had collapsed and Marion and another security guard were taking care of him, so it was easy to climb on stage.

Clayton was arguing with Andrew Sisterless. Frederick had torn down the sheet and was moving to the backstage area. “Hey Fred!” I shouted. “Freddie!”

Backstage, behind a wall, were members of the Exurbs, a Minneapolis institution and the real draw of the concert. Fred got past them but a big security guard, a Scandinavian farm kid who looked like he’d grown up bench-pressing bulls, stopped me.

“But that guy! The guy with blond dreads! He wrecked the concert!”

“Don’t know who you’re talking about,” the kid said.

“He was carrying the sheet! He wrecked the speaker!”

“Dude, what you been smoking?”

“You were trying to take the whole crowd with you to 2055?” I asked, later.

Clayton belched. He was drinking a Uno Y, and had the passenger seat of the Honda set back as far as it would go. With his grayish-yellow skin, he looked like a man laid out in a casket. Jodi was pressed against the door as far away from him as possible, playing with her phone, maybe texting a friend to say she had been kidnapped by a pair of madmen.

“But I had you mesmerized,” he said. “Everybody watching was getting hypnagogic. We were close to sending two, three hundred people to the future. And it was *loud*. We’d have made the trip across and forgotten 2012 forever.” He sneezed his beer across his chin: hard to drink flat on your back. “Did you see it, Jodi?”

“Yeah. I saw some weird shit.” She clicked on her keyboard. “But what I see now is somebody whose skin is all puffy and bruised because his kidneys are shutting down.”

“We should get you to a hospital,” I said.

“No! Fuck no! Let me go forward in time once more! I’m going to get it fixed! I added a preamp, brought in 1,000 watt speakers!”

"You had more power than that on the stage," Jodi said.

"Something blew the speaker out."

"It was Freddie the Great who blew it out," I said.

"Who?" Jodi asked.

"The blond sunburned reggae dude. Didn't you see him?"

Clayton squinted, as if trying to focus on a memory. I explained, as we circled around Clayton's neighborhood, looking for a parking space. "I stole Gretchen from him. He hated me. But he believed I was from the future. He was interested in the math of time travel. Maybe he wanted to get back at me at the concert."

"Frederick the Great? Reggae dude?"

"Yeah," I said. A thought occurred to me. "Maybe *he* built [myfourthdimension.org](http://myfourthdimension.org)," I said. "To mess with me. To mess with us. Maybe *he* sent us on time threads that would be wrong. Ersatz time lines."

"Why blow up a speaker?" Jodi asked.

"Cause he's out of control," I guessed. "He knows how powerful we are."

Clayton coughed phlegmatically. He seemed to be tracking the conversation with difficulty. "This reggae dude? You mean the guy wandering on stage?"

"Yeah."

"I recognize him, now that I remember. That was Ziggy. Ziggy Gellman."

"You know him in real life? I thought he was just an alias on your diabetes forum."

"No. He tried out for my ska-punk band years ago. Lead guitar. He could play but what did it matter? Reggae locks in a *ska band*?"

Frederick. Ziggy Gellman. The identification, the equating of the two, seemed incredible. "Whoever this guy is, he's old, right?"

"Old like us," Clayton said.

"Which means he hasn't mastered time yet."

"Then neither have we," Clayton said. "We're relying on his web portal. Or worse, your clone."

"A clone's a clone," I said.

"Whatever. Maybe you could fix it."

"What makes you think Freddie-Ziggy *wants* to be young?" Jodi asked. "Any fool could see it's revenge he's after, not long life."

I shrugged. If Frederick the Great was Ziggy Gellman that meant we had changed the past again.

I didn't think Frederick had ever tried being in Clayton's band.

But already that certainty was fading.

A homeless person slept in the stairwell. He reeked of bourbon and gastrointestinal distress. We had to step over him and Jodi did so with just the slightest variation in her step. I'd been worried she was afraid we had kidnapped her. What she was afraid of was having to take care of two more barflies who might die on her watch.

"Why live in such a shithole?" she asked Clayton.

"It was an exciting boho neighborhood, twenty years ago."

"You live here too?" she asked me.

"Nearby."

"Preppy boy sold out," Clayton said.

"I was never a preppy. When Gretchen . . . when things got hard for me, I couldn't stand the filth. Meth pipes cracking under foot, gangsta rap rattling my windows. Everything was menacing. All one winter, a frozen rat lay flattened on the parkway. It was always nighttime. Nobody cared about anyone. I saw a little boy bleed to death after a drive-by. Shot in the neck. His blood looked like motor oil in the gutter. I just stood there. I couldn't do anything."

“So you became a Republican.”

“Fuck you, Clayton. I moved ten blocks away.”

“It’s like a museum,” Jodi said.

“And me and Bob, we’re the main exhibits.”

“That’s not what I meant.” As Clayton booted up his Mac, cursing softly, she ran her fingers along the rock show posters that newly lined the wall—Sex Pistols at Winterland, The Mission U.K. at the Fillmore, The Clash at Shea Stadium, The Ramones, Black Flag, the Buzzcocks, the Smiths. They were laminated, carefully preserved, yet Clayton said, “Careful! Fingerprints can smudge them!”

“What’s with the gallery?” I asked. “Supposed to look like some kid’s dorm in 1986?”

“It’s for you, Bob.”

“I wasn’t into punk,” I said.

“I got Flock of Seagulls in the bathroom,” he said. “And shut that closet door.” I did and saw on the door Depeche Mode in their blond pretty-faced hair-gel days.

“You guys time travel by looking at old posters?”

“He needs a little push,” Clayton said. “He doesn’t believe in it enough. He thinks he’s going crazy and this mathematician from 1989 is out to get him.”

“He’s the webmaster,” I said. “Freddie. He tracked me down because he guessed I would like your music. He must have tried joining your band because he thought he could get to me that way. Then I saw him in Skinny Tie where I saw you play that time. And then I saw him today. He was on your stage!”

“See, he’s gone paranoid.”

“You both seem crazy,” Jodi said. But she didn’t step away from me. “Today was the weirdest show I’ve ever gone to. And I didn’t take any drugs.”

I was afraid for the woman. She didn’t know what she was getting herself into. “Don’t you have to go to work soon?”

“In a hour.” She pulled her cell phone from her purse, then called the bar. “Yeah, it’s me. I picked up stomach flu real bad. No. I didn’t touch anything at the concert. I’ll be in late if I feel better, but don’t count on me.”

She looked at Clayton. “This better be good.”

“Yeah.”

“Bob goes first.”

I pointed Clayton’s browser to the server that I had cloned two nights before. Yesterday, I’d changed some obvious log files and alerts. But if Freddie—if Ziggy—had anticipated I’d steal his software, he could have planted any number of security bombs I’d never find in executables that I’d downloaded. I was no security expert. Secure Socket Layers were not my friend.

“Come on, Bobbo,” Clayton said. And as if he’d been reading my thoughts: “If Ziggy—if your Freddie’s fucked us, there’s no way we can stop him. I’d say if he had to physically wreck our stage, that shows he’s desperate.”

I asked, “Aren’t you worried the tornado will wreck your fancy posters?”

Clayton shrugged. “In the closet,” he said. “Black trenchcoat. Oakland Raiders stocking cap.”

“*Raiders*?”

“You want a Vikings horn helmet? It was cold in 1988.”

I carried the trenchcoat and stocking cap. Too warm to wear in Clayton’s stuffy room.

I sat back down.

“Do I get to come?” Jodi asked.

"Not this time," I said. "I want somebody to verify what I'm seeing. A *consciousness*."

"Well, I'm conscious."

"Watch our Bobbo. He's an expert."

I wondered if this stupid new nickname was a temporal artifact. I pulled on the headphones. I went to the Time Travel Application and moused it backward to 31 December 1988. I noticed, peripherally, Clayton trying to pull Jodi away from the sight of the Initiate screen. And her resisting.

Then I heard the music, the mushy-dull beat common to so many techno songs of the last twenty years, paired with something in an Asian language (Japanese? Korean?) having no rhythmic relation whatsoever to the techno beat, not even one of opposites, for sometimes the rhythm of the drumbeat coincided with that of the language only to unalign a moment later. And then a third element asserted itself: a trumpet, and a sax, and a bagpipe, playing something that sounded now jazzy, now like a folk song; and I tried to attend to it because it was the thing that seemed I might make the most sense of; but as if to frustrate my efforts, the drumbeat, the same imbecilic thump-thump I'd heard from a thousand teenagers' earbuds, got louder and louder, painfully loud, and I wanted to rip off my headphones—except Gretchen was so near, and onscreen the Fresnel images, spinning, distorting, budging like so many living organisms, like hands *erupting*, seemed to be reaching for me, reaching from the old Mac monitor, reaching for me as the pain from the music became unbearable—

"Whoa, it's Max Headroom!" a teenage boy said.

"Hap-hap-happy New Year!" laughed another.

Smell of pot. The girl sitting with them on the couch waved her bong at me. "It's him! The bald man I told you about that one time!"

"Some skinhead?" the first asked.

"Gimme some skin!" the second teenage boy raised a hand as for a high-five.

"He, like, transported here when I was eating breakfast," the girl said, somberly.

The boys started riffing on Star Trek.

I apologized, then hurried away.

The club was called Batflesh. It was nominally a Goth club, but as I remember '88 was the year house music was starting its assault on dance club floors, so in an attempt to cash in on the trend, Batflesh was beginning to change its format. Or maybe it just wanted to pack in as many dancers as it could at \$20 a head. Whatever. It was only five blocks from Clayton's. The temperature was in the single digits Fahrenheit and the wind chill made it colder. I was glad for the trenchcoat and the Raiders cap. The ice crackled underneath leather dress shoes half a size too big I'd borrowed from Clayton: my neon blue LA Gear cross-trainers were not just contrary to the look I was trying to establish, but contrary to the times.

I'd put on some black mascara of Jodi's and had two series 1987 \$20 bills.

The doorman was carding. I pulled off my cap. I'd kept a driver's license from the early 2000s, pre-hologram but post-bald, but the trenchcoat and makeup were enough to establish my credentials; the doorman nodded me in without even studying the card.

Thudding bass, smell of cloves, lasers through the dry-ice smoke projected the time: 11:15. Girls in black, girls in shrouds, boys with made-up faces and heavy golden crucifixes; mohawks and Cure wigs but less of that than you'd have seen a year before; smaller clumps of punks in Doc Martens and spiked wristlets; and then the ones dancing, dancing to the dull and insipid house music, the largest group by far frat boys and sorority girls, though on one raised platform a guy in a

ruffled pirate shirt and makeup like Adam Ant circa 1981 danced frenetically and on another platform three heavy-set Goth girls danced in a slow circle. Those three could go like that all night. Adam Ant might collapse of heat exhaustion before the song ended.

A punk girl, jeans and torn Spandex top and pierced eyebrow, smiled at me as I passed her.

The virtues of the near dark.

I felt nostalgia, the reflexive hope I'd meet someone. I ordered a Long Island Iced Tea. Sipping it, I made the rounds of the club. It was two-level, built from an old warehouse. I looked for child-me, for Gretchen with her blond hair maybe already long enough to be in braids. There were nooks, big enough to hold a table or two, each thematically assigned a blacklit-velvet poster: Edgar Allan Poe in this one, Bela Lugosi in that, H. P. Lovecraft in a third. When I was twenty-two I thought this cool but now it seemed as kitschy as a velvet Elvis.

Climbing the stairs, I felt the Long Island Iced Tea affecting me. It was strong. No, I was weak. I sipped more slowly as I entered a second dance floor, more intimate, dance floor almost empty as industrial music played, Ministry or Cadavers and Cream or Skinny Puppy, abrasive stuff Clayton could have identified. Down a hallway was another set of nooks, and in one of them I found child-me and Gretchen and three or four other men I remembered being in the grad school math department as well as Donald Olaf, who had been a friend of mine.

"Uncle Bob," child-me said. "You came!"

"Of course." So this was the game, the alibi: me as uncle. "How are you doing, Bobby?"

"I'm drunk!"

"We've made the announcement," Gretchen said. She raised her hand. Despite her claims about rejecting the conventions of the patriarchy, she was wearing an engagement ring, a small ruby set in a sterling silver ring. I remembered seeing the same ring when we'd visited the Navajo's kiosk at Four Corners.

I burned with jealousy.

"Aren't you going to congratulate us, Uncle?"

"Best of luck to you," I said, sitting down. I drank more of the Iced Tea as I shook Donald Olaf's hand. "I've heard a lot about you," I said to Donald.

Donald squirmed. His eyes were bleary with drink. He was from Wisconsin. We'd been roommates our sophomore year. He'd gone from CS to molecular biology to economics to art history. School had offered too many choices. Then he'd found beer and drugs and dropped out senior year. Though drunk, he looked better than I remembered the last time I'd seen him. I asked: "You go to the U of M?"

"Yeah," he said.

"What you studying?"

"Theater," he said, almost apologetically.

He seemed shyer than I remembered. Maybe I'd changed his lifeline.

On the wall beside the poster of Rimbaud (blacklit eyes glowing demonically), a television screen showed Dick Clark in Times Square.

The club was playing Prince's "1999," from both the little dance floor on our floor and the bigger one below us. Gretchen stared at me. "1999," she said. "That's always seemed so *the future*, hasn't it, Uncle Bob? So unimaginably distant. But now it's just a decade away."

"And three minutes," one of her grad student friends said.

"But what's a decade?" she said. "What's next week? What's tomorrow? We're all of us prisoners of the moment, revising a past that has no reality, anticipating a future that's just a fiction, aren't we, Uncle Bob?"

She stared at me, but there was something different in her eyes, less challenge, less calculation, less of the flirt. Less of everything. Her eyelids had the heaviness of depression.

"Hey, Bobby the Time Traveler! Visiting our monad!"

It was Frederick. His reggae locks were shoulder-length and he sported a red Van Dyke beard. He was carrying a tray of champagne flutes. "Non-alcoholic for those of you on meds." He handed a flute to me, one to Gretchen. "The rest are high octane," he said, setting the tray down on the table. The others took their flutes.

He sat next to me in the booth, touching me, reeking of incense and pot. "You been politically prognosticating, Uncle Bobby? Did you tell Gretchen Dukakis would kick butt, too?"

"Stop it, Fred," Gretchen said.

"How about '92? Bush is sure going to macerate that Arkansas governor, isn't he?"

Child-me was reddening. I said, "Did ya hear that from Ziggy?" Gretchen had shaken off her depressive stupor and was glaring at Fred.

Dick Clark saved us, counting down, ball descending. We joined in at the last: "Three . . . two . . . one."

Cheers, noisemakers, Donald Olaf blew a crepe-paper streamer. We said our "Happy New Years" and we toasted and we drank our champagne. Mine tasted "high octane" to me, but I attributed the observation to the unwelcome emotions that Fred had brought.

We joined in as the club played "Auld Lang Syne," then the DJ played a sample-heavy version of U2's "New Year's Day."

"Guys," Fred said, "Uncle Bob's political crystal ball isn't worth shit, but his stock advice is sound. Go and get you some Microsoft shares before they release Windows 3.0."

The B-52s' "Rock Lobster" was playing now. The group stared at Fred, bewildered by his oracular wisdom.

"Freddie, why don't you just fuck off?" Bobby said.

Fred put his arm around me. "Don't you want to see Uncle Bob disappear?"

"Fred, thanks for the champagne, but I think *you're* the one who should go," Gretchen said.

"You must be unhappy," Fred whispered to me, "to see that rock on her finger."

"I wish them the best," I said loudly, then drank down my champagne.

"Me too." Fred stood up and with false bonhomie slapped me on the shoulder. "I'll be seeing you *later*."

The rest of us left soon after. Donald tripped coming down the staircase to the first floor and child-me caught him. "I'm drunk!" Donald said.

"I'm drunk, too!" child-me said.

They laughed. Gretchen frowned. I remembered this repartee Donald and I had, which we had thought hilarious when we were freshmen. Four years later, not so much. She asked: "How are we going to get home?"

I realized she was drunk, too; I had read too much into her heavy-lidded eyes.

"Bomb the Bass!" was playing, too loud for us to converse. After retrieving our coats from the coat check we assembled outside. The temperatures were sub-zero and Bobby was yawning the way I used to do after leaving a club, trying to make the muffle go away. "Aren't you close enough to walk?" I asked the three.

"I still live in the dorms," Donald said.

I pointed at a brightly lit diner two blocks distant. "You should drink coffee until you sober up."

"I'd still live in the dorms," Donald said.

Bobby laughed. Gretchen said, "We have to drive him home."

"Frederick the Great gave me real champagne!" Bobby said.

"You were drinking screwdrivers before Fred even showed up," Gretchen said.

"You had Mai Tais!" Bobby said.

"Come on, guys," I said. "Let's go to the diner and give your bodies time to metabolize the alcohol."

I started down the street. They followed me. When I reached the corner opposite the diner, I saw a man with yellow dreadlocks just sitting down at a booth.

Frederick.

"Did you drive the Chevy Bel Air tonight?" I asked Bobby.

"I fixed the defroster!" he said.

"And the brakes?"

"They've been fine all winter," he said.

"I'm sober enough to drive," I told them.

I had to drive. We would be okay as long as I drove.

Even in 1989, the Bel Air was an antique. It was a '72, and those seventeen years had been hard on it. Front bumper bungee-corded to the radiator, silver finish now gray and splotched camouflage-like with rust, it was the victim of too many winters and indifferent upkeep on Bobby's part.

Though the defroster was running, it still took us fifteen minutes to scrape the ice off the windows. My unmittened fingers numbed soon. Under the orange halogen streetlamps Gretchen looked lovely, blush in her cheeks, hair like yellow silk appearing from beneath a white cloche I'd given her just the previous Christmas. When we finally got into the car, she sat shotgun. In the back seat, Bobby and Donald giggled about being drunk. I wanted to reach over and kiss Gretchen, but my fingers were shot through with pain as the blood pulsed into my constricted capillaries. So I limited myself to advice. "Raynaud's Syndrome," I said to Bobby. "The pain when you warm up after being cold. It gets worse."

"Huh?"

"As you age, it hurts more. Think about that. Minnesota winters stay cold even with global warming."

"Global warming?" Gretchen said.

We were still worried about the ozone hole in 1989. Fears and crises multiply endlessly, crowding out the older ones. "Put your seatbelt on," I told her.

"Yes, sir," she said.

The upholstery as it heated smelled of dry rot, which was not unpleasant but a kind of perfume that evoked winter nights making out, downtown lights crystal clear in the cold and steam rising from grates in the street.

I started driving, hands at ten and two, but fishtailed because I was unused to the power of the V-8 engine. The brakes didn't catch at first, and I pumped them too hard, stalling the car in the middle of Third Street. A girl in a mink stole and a boy wearing a Happy New Year top hat crossed the street in front of us, laughing. "You haven't fixed the brakes, have you Bobby?" I asked.

"I'm drunk."

"You're driving with a lead foot," Gretchen said.

It was true. This was no Honda. I started up again, driving slowly, carefully, respectful of the danger of the ice and car. Like an old man. Well, to the three of them I *was* an old man. I would make sure that the worst that would happen is that we would be pulled over for driving too slow. We drove past clubs disgorging partiers, stocking caps over mullets or big big hair, long leather jackets over black jeans or mini-skirts, open containers of champagne, the apple-cheeked white Lutheran youth

of the Upper Midwest shouting and singing and excited as only the young can be and for reasons they could not anticipate or yet understand, for soon Communism would fall and the Cold War would end and there would be that short shining moment when it was said that history had ended too and all the world would embrace forever liberal democracy, free markets, and rock and roll.

I let myself feed upon their energy and did not think of how soon those predictions would prove wrong.

"We'll be sober by the time we get there at this rate," Gretchen said.

"Not a bad thing," I said. I thought about avoiding the Washington Avenue Bridge entirely, taking the Broadway Street Bridge to extend my time with her, but decided the Washington would be the safer route, with the traffic from downtown heavier and thus slower. It was driving too fast that had caused Gretchen's accident. Driving this same sad car recklessly in 1991. The number of red brake lights ahead confirmed my choice. "So tell me, what's up with the Fulbright?"

"I've wondered," she said. "Are you *on* the Fulbright committee?"

"What?"

"It was one of Fred's ideas. He likes it better than you being an NSA spook."

I didn't want to talk about Fred. "No. I'm Uncle Bob from the future."

"Awesome," Don said, as we started across the Washington Avenue Bridge. I'm not sure if he meant my being from the future or the way ice particles hung fog-like over the Mississippi, obscuring it and glittering in car headlights.

"I just want to know. Did you apply?"

"I sent it off just last week," Gretchen said. "You'd be interested. If you could understand it."

"Try me."

"Resolution of Temporal Paradoxes in a Bounded Event Space."

"Temporal Paradoxes?" I said. "You're doing time travel too?"

"It was Frederick the Great's idea!" Bobby shouted.

"Fred's burned out," Gretchen said. "Not even thirty, but too old already. He talks a good game. But he's lost the brain power to rigorously state his ideas. Never mind prove them. He does his little experiments with quantum effects, but he doesn't have the theoretical framework to drive, I mean mathematically derive, the consequences. I do. It's really just an extension of Lie-spaces: causality, time threads, all of it."

"Freddie gets high too much," Bobby said.

I ignored him. "You want to work on time travel with a Fulbright?"

"I'm interested in the theory," she said. "The application, not so much."

"You sent it off to the University of London?"

She laughed. Even drunk, she could be contemptuous of others' intellects. "The application goes to Washington, D.C. Getting accepted by London is a separate process."

"And Bobby, you're cool with that?"

"If she walks away, I will follow," he sang.

To anybody else, singing a line derived from U2's song about obsessive love would indicate commitment. But I knew what he was really doing. Trying to overcome despair with bravado.

I knew myself.

I asked him if he was getting treated for his mood swings.

He didn't answer, except to say, "I'm drunk."

"I'm drunk too!" Don made the same witless joke.

Don lived in Centennial Hall, which was for seniors and grad students. If he still lived in our sophomore dorm, I would have kicked him.

When he got out of the car he left the door open, as if expecting that Gretchen would move to the back seat, but she said, "Pull it closed, will you, Bobby?"

We watched Don stumble inside the building, then we drove off. Piles of old snow like mountain ridgelines narrowed the campus roads. I remembered how I would shower in the morning and rush across campus and my hair would be frozen solid by the time I reached my first class. We drove past a group of drunken shivering frat boys. I reached over and felt Gretchen's leg beneath her long coat. She didn't push my hand away but I felt her thigh go rigid beneath my touch.

I moved my hand back to the wheel.

We started back across the Washington Bridge. Me not Gretchen driving so we would be safe. But I made sure they put their seatbelts on anyway.

Traffic in the downtown direction was not as heavy and the snowfall was slowing.

"You know," Bobby said, "I've been in this therapy group at student health. And seeing this shrink. Maybe we'll find an antidepressant that works."

"Talk therapy didn't do much for me," Gretchen said. "ECT was my ticket."

"Everyone's different," I said. "Mixing therapy and meds achieves the best results. Studies have proved it. Or will prove it. And there's going to be a shitload of antidepressants coming out in the next few years."

"Yeah?" Bobby asked.

"Watch out!" Gretchen cried.

The semi-truck that had been in the right lane was drifting left into our lane. I hit the brakes. Nothing happened. I hit them again, pumped them; but they were dead. We would go under the truck, windshield smashing into its hard steel undercarriage I honked and Bobby screamed and Gretchen repeated, "Watch out!"

And what could I do but veer hard to the left into the guardrail that with a metal-on-metal grating gave way to the giant Chevy and sent us plunging off the bridge.

And into the fog and the cold Mississippi.

Clayton was gone and Jodi was sitting on his couch, wrapped in a blanket, drinking hot chocolate, a yellowing back issue of *New Musical Express* open in her lap.

"Well, you're back," she said. "The ambulance took him away about an hour ago."

"Clayton? What happened?"

"Diabetic crisis, I guess."

"Is he going to be okay?"

She was trembling as she sipped hot chocolate. "They think so. They were making sarcastic jokes as they put him on the gurney. Like they always do."

"Like they always do?"

I noticed a poster for Electric Third Rail above the Macintosh, which was shut down.

"You were the one we worried about. We couldn't wake you up." She frowned. "It was you we called 911 for. I think."

"So I wasn't gone? You didn't see me go—to the past?"

"No. Your eyes glazed over. I wanted to see what you were looking at but Clayton held me back. Like always."

"Like always."

She looked at me, frowning. With the frown she looked so much like Gretchen.

Gretchen who I did not save.

Gretchen who died in 1989 after we fought and she drove my crappy car off the George Washington Bridge while I kept dancing at Batflesh.

"You want some hot chocolate?"

"You got some to go? I think I should go home."

She stood and gave me the sort of resigned expression I'd seen her give drunks who had refused her offer to call a taxi cab.

Then she went into her kitchen and brought out a minute later a Minnesota Vikings souvenir mug.

What is memory, what is dream? Jodi looked like Gretchen and it was me who liked her, but it was Clayton who accepted Diet Dr. Peppers from her between sets and it was Clayton she moved in with. What is memory, what is dream?

I drove off the bridge. Or I kept dancing at Batflesh, to Electric Third Rail, one of my favorite Goth bands until that night.

My Honda was parked on a narrow street a block away from Clayton's apartment. Clayton's and Jodi's. The building across the street was dark with broken windows.

"Yo, Bobby," said the man who stood leaning against my car, joint bright as he puffed. In its red light his face looked as worn-down as that of a man about to enter rehab. The dreadlocks that remained reminded me of the rotting ropes hanging from the spars of an old ship. It was Freddie, mad Freddie. "How'd it go for you?"

"I killed her," I said. "Again."

"You made her stay?"

"No, I drove off the bridge with her in the car." The water hard as stone when we struck it but cold as it took us in. "I should have died too. Me and young me."

"Consciousness is conservative. The most likely stories are the ones you remember."

Yes, I remembered dancing.

"Are you going to keep trying?" he asked.

"Do you keep trying? You're the one with the software. You're the one who pretended to be Ziggy."

Amused, he snorted smoke. "Ziggy was just a story to get closer to you 'cause I knew you would be buds with Clayton." He coughed. "Or *was* he a story? The more you try, the more confused you get. Dreams merge with fantasy with memories. The monads stay the same but the links change. You can keep pushing, struggling, but I don't know if you can save her. You might live in the eighties forever, though."

I sipped my hot chocolate and looked at the madman. "Can I give you a ride somewhere?"

"No thanks. I got a time to be."

What is memory, what is dream?

There is the other memory, of November seventh, 1991, where we had a fight at the same club now called NRG, and then Gretchen died, same car off same bridge, while I kept dancing, dancing to the house music, tinny piano and muffled drum-beats and repetitive bass lines designed to drive all but autistics and the Ecstasy-enhanced insane.

And that memory more and more fragmentary, as I sipped hot chocolate from the mug, a memory like the residues of a blackout, or the dreams that those who no longer drink brood upon in daylight hours. ○

Copyright © 2012 David Ira Cleary

## ALTERNATE REALITIES

**EMBASSYTOWN**  
by China Mieville,  
Del Rey, \$26.00

**ENIGMATIC PILOT**  
by Kris Saknussemm,  
Del Rey, \$16.00

**REVES DE GLOIRE**  
by Roland C. Wagner,  
L'Atalante, 24.50 euros

**THE VOODOO QUANTUM LEAP**  
by Reginald Crosley, MD,  
Llewellyn Publications, \$16.95

**S**ince somewhere in the early 1960s science fiction and fantasy have been basketed together in commercial terms as “SF,” for that product label contained enough in content common to be marketed in the same genre category to something like the same readership demographic, or at least overlapping readership demographics. And ever since then there has been an ongoing argument as to whether or not “science fiction” and “fantasy” were really aspects of the same thing, or whether lumping them together as “SF” was actually a shotgun marriage for the marketing convenience of the publishers holding the said marketing weapon.

In business terms, it is true that the commercial success of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in mass market paperback created a mass market for original fantasy novels that hadn’t existed before, that publishers turned to “science fiction writers” to produce them, and that that was really how science fiction and fantasy came to cohabit in “SF” genre lines.

It is also undeniably true that in strictly technical literary and, indeed, philosophical terms, there is a clear dif-

ference between “science fiction” and “fantasy.” That by definition, science fiction is literature that speculates within the bounds of the known laws of mass and energy, the reality in which the readers find themselves, and fantasy is the literature that lives outside the boundaries of the scientifically possible, the literature that is what it is because it embraces the clearly impossible. Well, maybe.

In those terms, it seemed pretty clear cut that science fiction and fantasy were quite obviously not the same thing at all in literary terms—indeed were polar opposites. I must confess that I saw things more or less in those terms myself until fairly recently, and I would still contend that this distinction holds up and is of clear and serious import when it comes to fantasy and “hard science fiction,” and even to the kind of “extended hard science fiction” I write most of the time myself.

Back in the day, “hard science fiction” more or less meant science fiction in which the speculative scientific and/or technological element was the McGuffin of the story, generated the plot and theme, was, one way or another, what the story was *about*. But what I mean by “extended hard science fiction” is, simply and more broadly, fiction that has some sort of speculative element and takes care not to violate the known laws of mass and energy, but does not necessarily make the scientific and/or technological speculation front and center in story or thematic terms.

But by now, things having evolved the way they have, maybe this is what should be called “hard science fiction,” or just “science fiction,” period, and all other fiction taking place in sociotechnological settings different from that of the readership should be called something else.

I’d call what is now shoehorned into the commercial “SF” category “Alternate

Reality Fiction,” because that would be accurate and inclusive of science fiction, fantasy, and alternate history fiction, if only it fell trippingly on the inner ear, which, alas, it doesn’t seem to.

For looked at that way, science fiction, fantasy, and the alternate history story *do* have one very large thing in common—something so central that they *do* appeal to somewhat overlapping readerships.

The stories of all three of these literary mode are set in realities other than that of the consensus reality of the readers’ here and now. And the way this clade of modes, or genres, or whatever you want to call them, have been more recently evolving, the borders between them have been fuzzing out.

Decades ago, Alexei Panshin was writing about “science fiction that knows it’s science fiction,” but those terms were a little misleading to what Panshin was actually pointing out. Namely, that science fiction rife with things like faster-than-light starships, swamp lizards on Venus, Martian Canals, and so forth not only violated known scientific knowledge, but *knew it was doing so*.

Not really science fiction that knew it was science fiction, but science fiction that knew (when it was not simply ignorant) that it was really *fantasy*.

Out of this, and much more recently, arose the so-called “New Space Opera,” which in effect said to itself and to readers, “Why the hell not?”

The story’s the thing, and if literally engaging and entertaining fantasy fiction can be set in alternate realities where various impossible magics work, where unicorns frolic and fire-breathing dragons fly, where vampires and werewolves are top predators, where wishing can make it so, why can’t we have dinosaurs on Venus and canal-side civilizations on Mars and faster than light galleons—science fiction that *knows* it’s really fantasy in “science fiction” clothing and admits it, and thus frees itself to become the New Space Opera?

Around 2002, something called the “Mundane SF Movement” was founded

and has been championed by the excellent writer Geoff Ryman. The thesis of this movement is to purify “science fiction” from this sort of thing, or at any rate to champion a subgenre of science fiction that is free from it, and set entirely on Earth.

Well, for sure, I have written a lot of such stuff myself. But by individual creative choice, I’ve also written things like *Russian Spring*, which manage to work within the constraints of “hard science fiction” without being confined entirely to Terra, Firma or otherwise, as well as science fiction that takes place entirely on this planet; it’s done by a great many writers throughout the long history of speculative fiction.

And this sort of arbitrarily restrictive manifesto puts me in mind of the Tea Party dogma of no tax increases no matter what.

And in between the emergences of the New Space Opera and the Mundane SF Movement we’ve had China Miéville’s New Weird, which to me seems nothing much more or less than Aleister Crowley’s “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law” applied to freeing fantasy from even the constraints of internal consistency within its own created alternate reality.

And now we have *Embassytown* by China Miéville himself, which could be classified as a kind of New Space Opera, set as it is and fictionally dependent upon a reality that includes faster than light starships, and a fairly star-flung human civilization and somewhat less star-flung colonialist human empire, in a galaxy where sapient aliens abound.

The Mundane SF Movement might righteously deem this New Space Opera, and the New Space Opera folks might welcome it in to their ranks, and technically and taxonomically they might both be right.

But while in some ways this might be the weirdest thing Miéville has written, the New Weird it is not, for it is scrupulously consistent internally for once. It’s hard science fiction even, if you are willing to swallow Miéville’s particular brand

of rubber science faster-than-light travel, and it's very serious indeed in certain other scientific terms, absolute terms involving that most central of questions, the relationship between language and consciousness, and therefore between external reality and the experience thereof by sapients.

You can't get much deeper into the literary deeps of alternate realities than that.

The narrative female first person voice, is that of Avice Benner Cho, human colonial daughter of the *Embassytown* of the title, who left Ariekei, the planet of her birth out there on the fringes of the regions of the galaxy known to humans, for a more adventurous cosmopolitan life as an "immerser," crewing on faster-than-light starships plying the starways via one of the usual rubber science means concocted for story purposes, but who returns to Ariekei and to Embassytown for complex personal and more or less political reasons near the beginning of the novel.

Embassytown is just what the title says it is, a human embassy to the native Ariekei amidst an alien city on a planet where humans cannot even breathe the atmosphere without enabling technology.

The Ariekei are *really* alien aliens, possibly the most alien aliens in the literature, at any rate certainly as alien to humans as a sapient species can get, as alien, that is, as a fictional sapient species can be presented to the reader by a novelist as puissant as China Miéville.

It's a masterful job of it, made so in part by what Miéville *does not* describe, namely what the Ariekei actually look like, taking a cue perhaps from H.P. Lovecraft's deliberately adjectivally vague nondescriptions of the hideous Old Ones. But being a much better and more subtle literary artist than Lovecraft, Miéville does it much more cleverly and subtly.

What we get instead of attempts at an overall physical description is narrow-focus descriptions of various outré organs and appendages, giving the impression that the Ariekei are so physically differ-

ent from anything evolved in the terrestrial biomass that they cannot even be fully apprehended by the human visual apparatus as a coherent whole.

It doesn't get any more alien than that, now does it?

Well, yes it does.

For what Miéville is centrally after here is the molding of sapient consciousness, and therefore also sapient culture, by language and vice versa in a feedback loop.

There's a complex political and, in the end anti-colonial struggle that is the story backbone of *Embassytown*. Nor is Avice's personal story scant, and the various threads do come together successfully in a climactic epiphany at the end. But this exploration of how language, consciousness, and culture interact with each other, and shape each other to arguably create a subjective perceptual reality that is the only reality that sapience can directly know, is what takes *Embassytown* far deeper than what would otherwise be merely top drawer New Space Opera.

The Ariekei cannot lie. This is not a matter of moral virtue. Their language, unique in the known galaxy, has no way of directly describing something that does not presently exist. It's not that they won't or can't tell anything but the truth, but that they can't conceive of anything nonexistent in realtime because their language is not equipped to let them do so.

And it's not that they don't want to be able do so either, not after they come in contact with humans, who have no linguistic problem with conceiving and speaking more than the current concrete truth and are therefore able to think and convey thoughts that are speculative.

To make linguistic matters even more complicated, Ariekei is a kind of fugal language that is spoken via the interaction of two different voices at the same time, and the Ariekei do not recognize anything that does not speak this way as sapient. It's not racism, it's not species chauvinism, it's the way they are biologically hardwired.

Humans, of course, do not have the

physical apparatus to do this, so they must somehow work around it, and they do this by creating "Ambassadors" composed of two genetically identical humans raised and trained from birth to function as a single entity, and therefore able to say two things at the same time—and therefore recognizable as single sapient beings by the Ariekei.

Who do want to learn how to lie in their own language, not merely to be able to dissemble for personal or political gain, but in order to be able to expand their linguistic and conceptual consciousnesses to include speculative consideration of that which does not exist, as the humans can.

This they attempt to do by turning specific humans into *similes* and, ultimately, perhaps into metaphors. They put the human through some sort of physical act like "eating whatever is given to her" and then they can say and conceive something like "what I am being asked to do is like the girl who ate whatever was given to her." This introduces the very concept of simile and metaphor into an alien language and therefore an alien consciousness, and therefore an alien subjective reality where it had not existed before.

China Miéville is not crazy or hubristic enough to try to put the reader actually inside Ariekei consciousness. It's all experienced from the outside, from the point of view of Avice, who is one of the human similes, and which for complicated reasons is part of why she has returned to *Embassytown*.

And while the foregoing may be the brilliantly portrayed central speculative concern of *Embassytown*, the novel is not at all as dry and theoretical as this may make it sound. There is a well written story of a complex anti-colonialist struggle here, and, as almost always with Miéville, there is a genuine and sophisticated political passion behind it. Nor are Avice and other principle players cardboard characters.

But that being said, it is Miéville's exploration of an alien language, consciousness, and culture, and indeed how

it is altered by contact with human language, consciousness, and culture, which raises *Embassytown* above sub-genre definitions like New Space Opera, the New Weird, and so forth, and makes it a special work of literature in general, intellectually challenging and emotionally engaging at the same time, and quite unique. True speculative fiction and true science fiction, if those terms are to have any real and useful meaning at all.

*Enigmatic Pilot* by Kris Saknussemm, on the other hand, is indeed alternate reality fiction, but not science fiction at all—"A Tall Tale Too True," as the subtitle on the cover proclaims, which, of course, is not true at all. It's a sort of alternate history story, but it's really not that either.

The cover blurb by Michael Moorcock compares it to the work of Thomas Pynchon in general terms, and Moorcock does have a point, though I would liken *Enigmatic Pilot* more specifically to Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* and even to Orson Scott Card's *Alvin Maker* series. For while I would not presume to contend that either Saknussemm or Card are quite on the literary level of Pynchon, these three works do have something central in common, something that distinguishes them from alternate history tales like Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* or Harry Turtledove's alternate World War II novels, or any number of stories set in alternate histories where the South won the American Civil War.

This is alternate history of a kind, but not *that* kind.

*Enigmatic Pilot*, like *Mason & Dixon*, is set in the American past, albeit in a later period, and like the Pynchon, and to a lesser extent the Card, is a hybrid of what might be called interstitial alternate history and outright fantasy.

What I mean by interstitial alternate history is fiction set in the holes in the historical record, denying or overthrowing no real-world recorded history, but shoehorning its story into events, setting, characters, perhaps even technology, that just might have existed in a real-world historical period.

Fantasy is the fiction that requires violation of the present-day knowledge of the laws of mass and energy, even when it comes to events in the past. So magical powers and so forth—carefully limited in the Alvin Maker series, played around with more free form in *Mason & Dixon* and in somewhat different fashion in *Enigmatic Pilot*—render this sort of thing arguably fantasy.

Arguably because if the fantasy elements do not change history, do not end up creating or mandating an alternate present, a reality different from that of the reader, then who is to say what was real and what was not.

It's the middle of the nineteenth century in the American Midwest, which, however, in that period was the American frontier. The main protagonist of what indeed is a tall tale, but rather than too true, really too tall to be true, is Lloyd Sitturd, child prodigy of a hard-scrabble frontier family, who, among more mysterious psychic powers, is a wizard inventor, a kind of steampunk pre-teen Thomas Edison decades ahead of the historical technology of his time. Pre-teen but not pre-pubescent, with a full-blown sexual libido, if not a sophisticated perception or control of same, at least when his journey begins.

After various screw-ups of which Lloyd is not exactly innocent, the family loses its farm, and thanks to a mysterious missive from a relative in distant Texas promising succor and greater things, sets out on a difficult, perilous, magical mystery tour of an odyssey from their lost farm outside relatively settled Zanesville, Ohio, via land and river through wild, woolly, and colorful frontier towns like St. Louis toward the enigmatically promised pot of something in far-off Texas.

The journey is the main interest in this sort of tale, and a tall tale it is, involving complex and ambiguous conflicts between two secret societies of masters or would-be masters of the world seeking to use Lloyd as a pawn or maybe even a knight in their game, Lloyd's sexual awakening and finding of

his possibly long-lost true love to be, escapes, fantastic inventions, and along the way colorful, apparently well-researched, engaging depiction of this scruffily baroque period of the early American frontier.

Beautifully written, colorfully rendered, overwhelmingly rich in inventive detail, adventurous fun, reminiscent of Pynchon indeed, *Enigmatic Pilot* is everything this sort of tall tale should be, except . . .

. . . if only . . .

The novel begins with a flash-forward to 1869 and a Cavalry Lieutenant in the Dakotas encountering mysterious entities that maybe seem to be something like aliens on their way to the future Hanger 51, the mystery of which is not resolved. The insertion of this flash-forward from the point of view of a character who does not appear in the rest of the novel is not explained either as you approach the final pages.

And the Sitturd family does not seem to have enough pages left to reach the goal of their journey in Texas either. . . . Oh no! He wouldn't!

Oh yes, he would, and he did.

*Enigmatic Pilot* ends without even a partial resolution. The secret society threads are not resolved. Lloyd is not reunited with his lost love, nor is she definitively lost, either. What's the meaning of the opening flash-forward? What awaits Lloyd in Texas?

Buy the next installment to find out!

Only at the end of the book does *Enigmatic Pilot* reveal itself as the opening book of a novel series. Worse still, much worse, outrageously worse, infuriatingly worse, nowhere in the package is this even revealed!

Kris Saknussemm writes like a major novelist to come. Moorcock's blurb is not hyperbole. I greatly enjoyed *Enigmatic Pilot* until the last few pages when I realized I had been so unfairly conned, and had to restrain myself from throwing the book across the room.

At the very least any first novel in a series should conclude with enough of a

partial resolution to leave the readers partially satisfied. To fail to do this without even letting you know that you *are* reading the first novel in a series is being hotly seduced and then left hanging by your thumbs in mid-air panting with a case of the literary blue balls.

And for present purposes, without even a clear understanding of what species of alternate reality fiction this novel, or rather this novel series, is going to turn out to be, since it's impossible to tell which way it's going. Will it somehow turn into a kind of alternate reality science fiction or New Space Opera with the beings in the opening flash-forward revealed as history-changing aliens? Will it continue as interstitial alternate history with the tale snake-dancing through the gaps in the historical record?

¿Quién sabe?

Well, it's certainly not going to turn into something like *Reves de Gloire*, by Roland C. Wagner, even if it does at the end weigh in at almost seven hundred pages. Because, as far as I know, no one has ever written an alternate history novel like *Reves de Gloire*.

I'd better deal with the disclosures first.

*Reves de Gloire* is written in French, though it certainly deserves to be translated into English. Roland Wagner is a long-time friend of mine who has co-translated some of my novels into French. He has also written an introduction to an edition of *The Iron Dream* that is going to be relevant to this discussion.

So how dare to review a novel currently available only in French, by a writer who I admit is a personal friend?

The haiku version of an answer:

Decades ago, Algys Budrys, a fine novelist and perhaps the most important science fiction critic of the day, had the amazing chutzpah to review his own novel, and quite favorably too.

Wrote Budrys, in effect: I'm an important critic and this is a fine novel, so why should it suffer from not being reviewed by the great me?

Well, I didn't write *Reves de Gloire*, and

Roland Wagner is not writing this review. But this is a ground-breaking novel, and aside from whether the author should or should not suffer from it not being reviewed in these pages, Anglophone writers of alternate history surely should not be deprived of what it means for the evolution of that mode just because it's written in French and the critic who was impressed enough to be enticed to read its seven hundred pages in his second language happens to have a personal relationship with the author thereof.

Indeed, as we shall see, in this case, it's a critical advantage.

The time-honored literary method of writing an alternate history novel is to change a single key historical inflection point and proceed from there to create an alternate reality deriving from that pivotal alteration. What would the world be like if the Nazis had won the Second World War? If Hitler had died in the trenches of World War I? If the South had won the Civil War? If Lincoln had not gone to the theater to be assassinated by John Wilkes Booth? And so forth.

That's not what Roland Wagner has done in *Reves de Gloire*.

He's not altered one inflection point but many. Charles De Gaulle is assassinated and doesn't end the Algerian war of independence from France. JFK does not die in Dallas and remains alive as president in a wheelchair. Lavrenti Beria is ruler of the Soviet Union during the Hungarian uprising and lobs a nuclear bomb at Budapest that doesn't go off. The space race to the Moon between the Soviet Union and the United States ends with two spacecraft actually racing to the Moon, the Russians getting there minutes ahead of the Americans, but crashing with no survivors. And so on and so forth.

An alternate history created by the complex interaction of many *independent* changes. And not just political ones.

*Reves de Gloire* literally translates into "Dreams of Glory" in English, but in the novel it's more multiplex than that. The novel is about dreams of glory to be sure, but *Gloire* is the name of a psychedelic

drug that may or may not be LSD (and there's an unstated bilingual pun here, because in English morning glory seeds are another psychedelic), but which is certainly introduced into Europe by Timothy Leary (further disclosure: Tim was a friend of mine). First by throwing a permanent party in a grand luxe suite at the Ritz Hotel in Paris that he could never have afforded in our reality, and then at a kind of summer-long Woodstock in Biarritz spawning a counterculture called the "vautriens," something like the hippies but more overtly politically socialist in the manner of Israeli kibbutzim, and more pragmatically together.

And Wagner further creates a bewilderingly detailed future history of rock and roll, combining musicians, groups, songs, albums, subgenres, from our own musicological popular culture tradition with entirely invented ones, to the point where one would have to be as obsessed with this stuff as the record collector and dealer who is one of his main characters to figure out which is which.

There's more, there's much more, and Wagner goes even further out on his literary limb by writing this long novel as a series of first person narrations by many characters, some ongoing, some one-shots, none of whom introduce themselves to the reader by name or are introduced by name by the author, and whose names the readers learn, if they learn them at all, only if mentioned by name by another first person viewpoint character.

And to make matters even more complicated, the story of *Reves de Gloire*, covering decades of alternate history, not only unfurls in three separate time-streams, but not even in sequence, so that the full meaning of events and personages in the furthest future ones may be elucidated by revelations of their formative pasts only toward the end of the novel.

How, you may well ask, can all this possibly make enough coherent sense to carry someone through seven hundred pages of reading it even in their *first* language without bogging down and losing their way, let alone in their *second*?

But it does.

And not only that, even with my good-deal-less than perfect command of French, even with the multiple styles therein generated by the narrative form, it doesn't read like pretentious and tedious experimental fiction at all. It reads *fast*, it rocks and it rolls, like Wagner's previous relatively straightforward popular science fiction. And this for an Anglophone reading it in French, who can only jealously imagine how facilely it must read to a French reader.

How, you may well ask, does Wagner manage to pull this off?

This is fiction as experimental as it gets, but it's not experimentation just for its own sake. Wagner is first and foremost using these experimental techniques and forms in the service of a passionately told and engaging *story*, and that's why *Reves de Gloire* is an experiment that *works*.

That, after all, is what experimental fiction should be trying to achieve, isn't it? If it doesn't, it's just a technically interesting failure.

And now we have arrived at the point where the critic's personal relationship with the author of the novel and what is revealed in the author's introduction to the critic's own novel becomes a critical advantage rather than just a bit of a queasy embarrassment.

*Reves de Gloire* is, among other things, centrally a political novel, created in wide, deep, detailed, and, yes, scholarly detail even though the history it portrays is an imaginary alternate one. And while Roland Wagner has written plenty of fiction rooted in rock and roll and psychedelia, even to the point of fronting a band called Brain Damage, he has never written anything like this before, and certainly not with this level of political and cultural passion, infused with real anger and in the end bordering on real tragedy.

The central alternate history here is that of what in our reality is a single Algeria, from the 1950s to more or less the present day, but which in Wagner's fictional reality is partitioned into "Algerie,"

the Arab portion, and "Algérois," the French portion. The latter initially includes the capital city of the whole thing in our reality, Algiers, which later becomes the city state of Alger in the novel, modeled to a certain degree on the Paris Commune of 1871, and/or the San Francisco of the 1967 Summer of Love.

There is no mistaking on which side Wagner's political, cultural, musical, and mystical psychedelic loyalty and passion lies in *Reves de Gloire*. Namely, against the endless fascist and chauvinistic coups in his "Algérie" and "Algérois" and his alternate France, and with the multicultural vautrien communards of Alger, at least tentatively done in by the macropolitics and by a scourge of the "blanch," a white powder, which may be heroin, or may be cocaine, or may be the very methedrine that turned the Summer of Love in San Francisco into a Winter of Despair.

What I didn't know until I read the tangentially autobiographical essay that Wagner wrote for an edition of *The Iron Dream*—which is an alternate history within an alternate history psychologically deconstructing Nazi Germany and, the psychic pathology of Adolf Hitler and therefore, the fascist psyche—because he had never really spoken much about it to me was that Wagner comes from a "Pied Noir" family background.

That is, from the political and psychic culture of the several million French families who were citizens and cultural products of colonial Algeria in our reality and fled to France after the whole of Algeria became an independent state.

Thus the deeply personal and passionate involvement in the overall tale of *Reves de Gloire* and Roland Wagner's interesting and surprising ability to nevertheless tell it in the multiplex and even measuredly sympathetically first person viewpoints not only of those with whom the author is wholeheartedly sympathetic, but to allow Arab Muslims of various degrees of Islamic fundamentalism and passion, veterans of the French Foreign Legion, and even raving fascists, to have their own credible first person say.

Which is why *Reves de Gloire* is a personal breakthrough for the author, a "masterpiece" in the medieval sense of a breakthrough to a more mature literary level.

But that it is also a formal and stylistic quantum leap in the literary possibilities of the alternate reality novel, no matter what language it is written in, or how successful on any other level, is why I am reviewing it here, whether it ever gets translated into English or not. Not so much primarily for the benefit of the author, but for the benefit of future would-be authors of the alternate history novel, whose possibilities Roland C. Wagner has expanded herein.

And speaking of quantum leaps, nor am I about to review *The Voodoo Quantum Leap*, a non-fiction book by Reginald Crosley, M.D., primarily for the benefit of the author—though this obscure book deserves far more attention than whatever accolades that it and its author have managed to get—but for the benefit of any readership interested at all in the scientific aspect of science fiction.

Because the first two or three chapters at least are probably the best, most complete, most lucid, and most readable explication of quantum physics, and indeed the entire history of physics, ever written for a reasonably educated but unspecialized readership.

First published in 2000 by an outfit in St. Paul, Minnesota, called Llewellyn Publications, seemingly never reprinted and hard to get, *The Voodoo Quantum Leap* deserves a much wider readership and vice versa. For were there a Nobel Prize for educating readers in physics, Reginald Crosley would have deserved to have gotten it. I count myself among the beneficiaries, even though I did not count myself as someone who would have benefited from a "Quantum Physics for Dummies" primer.

But Quantum Physics for Dummies this is not!

I came upon *The Voodoo Quantum Leap* for quite another purpose, looking for a credible non-bullshit textbook on voodoo as research for a novel I am writ-

ing, and believe me there are not many such things.

I was attracted by the title, but also by the back cover copy:

In this unique synthesis of African-Haitian spirituality, Western Religion, Eastern mysticism, and modern science, Dr. Crosley presents Vodou as a metaphysical experience—a bridge to parallel universes and mystical dimensions, confirmed by the eerie tenets of quantum physics.

For once, cover copy was the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

I found that Reginald Crosley's book was by far the best thing around for my original purpose, too, an exhaustingly, scholarly yet well-written and eminently readable complete history, theological and metaphysical primer, and anthropological study of the evolution of Haitian voodoo, tracing it back to several West African versions and loa pantheons, which was exactly what I needed.

But Crosley, as the cover copy clearly promised, was after much more than that. Reginald Crosley is a Haitian doctor living and working in the United States, and a published poet in French, though *The Voodoo Quantum Leap* was written in English. His thesis here is that the loas of the several voodoo pantheons, rather than being "gods" in the conventional sense, are actually real sentient entities existing in the alternate reality of quantum physics, dark matter entities with desires, and less than morally perfect agendas of their own, to simplify an exhaustively complex argument, and what is more of his work, that West African metaphysics has long come reasonably close to this truth, at least on a metaphorical level.

Well, this is very interesting, to say the least, and if it interests you, by all means read his book for that reason alone if you can lay hands on it. But this is not why I am writing about Crosley's book in an essay about alternate realities in a science fiction magazine.

I am steering readers of science fiction to *The Voodoo Quantum Leap* because anyone interested in the science end of science fiction and its fictional alternate realities surely should have some interest in quantum physics. For quantum physics presents an alternate reality that, while currently more or less accepted by science as the real deal on the microcosmic quantum level, is most certainly a reality quite different from what we actually perceive on the macrocosmic level. A paradox yet to be fully resolved, and arcane and difficult enough to fully comprehend on a metaphysical level for the likes of Nils Bohr and Albert Einstein to argue about it for years without coming to a full agreement as to the nature of ultimate reality.

Reginald Crosley herein actually tries to resolve it via a grand synthesis of Western theology, Eastern mysticism, African voodoo, and quantum physics, and comes pretty damn close to bridging it with a speculation as to the quantum nature of dark matter. And while this may be subject to very interesting argument on a metaphysical and scientific level, I'm not about to get into that here.

The reason that I am so wholeheartedly recommending *The Voodoo Quantum Leap* to readers of science fiction is the first two or three chapters of this eight chapter book. Because in order to make his case to a general readership—not one of experts in quantum physics or voodoo devotees or even science fiction readers—Crosley has to fully educate it in the entire history of physics and its relationship to various traditions of metaphysics, up to and including general and special relativity, quantum physics, and their disagreements and paradoxes.

And he actually pulls it off.

Before sitting down to read *The Voodoo Quantum Leap*, I thought the first few chapters were something I was going to have to breeze through to get to the information on voodoo that I was after.

Boy, was I wrong!

I'd thought myself reasonably knowledgeable when it came to quantum

physics. I had gone into quantum cosmology at significant detail and depth in *He Walked Among Us* and done the necessary homework. I had even read Einstein and gotten through Lee Smolin's *The Trouble with Physics* in order to comprehend string theory, or so I thought.

But I think that even Stephen Hawking might have something to learn, or at least ponder, from the first three chapters or so of *The Voodoo Quantum Leap*. And I would certainly recommend them as required reading in any college-level introductory course in physics, or even a graduate course in Quantum Physics 101.

Reginald Crosley's explication of the evolution of physics and its currently evolved status is the most lucid and well written introduction to the general and specific subjects that I have ever read or heard of. And it is scientifically and scholarly rigorous enough to earn the respect of the specialists who might be more interested in his metaphysical speculations within those restraints than in gaining an education in what they more or less already know.

I can certainly attest that as far as I'm personally concerned, reading *The Voodoo Quantum Leap* has been a quantum leap for my own understanding of quantum physics.

Which is not to say I can yet quite comprehend quantum physics on the level that Reginald Crosley does, though I think that maybe I could if I re-read those first three chapters several times very slowly. Well written they are and brilliantly explanatory, but a quick and easy read they are not. Because there is nothing easy about the subject matter—after all, Bohr and Einstein themselves were never able to come to clear agreement on it.

Required reading for university level courses? The first three chapters of *The Voodoo Quantum Leap* could just as well serve as the only textbook for Quantum Physics 101.

And certainly for writers and readers interested in the alternate physics and literary metaphysics of quantum reality. ◎

Copyright © 2012 Norman Spinrad

# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

My picks for March are ConDor, StellarCon, LunaCon (where I'll be), FantaSciCon and Mid-South Con. In addition, all of the Easter Weekend cons (6-8 April) look good (note MarCon's not Memorial Day anymore). Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Strauss

## MARCH 2012

2-4—**ConDor.** For info, write: **Box 15771, San Diego CA 92175.** Or phone: (972) 242-5999 (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). (**Web**) [condorcon.org](http://condorcon.org). (**E-mail**) [info@condorcon.org](mailto:info@condorcon.org). Con will be held in: San Diego CA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Town and Country. Guests will include: Lowell Cunningham, Mike Bocianowski. Theme: "Men in Black: Aliens, Conspiracies and Feds, Oh My!"

2-4—**StellarCon.** [stellarcon.org](http://stellarcon.org). High Point NC. Patrick Rothfuss, Mark Poole, James and Tara Fulbright, Michael Z. Williamson.

2-4—**ECOF.** [edgarriceburroughs.com](http://edgarriceburroughs.com). Tarzana CA. The centennial of the creator of Tarzan of the Jungle and John Carter of Mars.

2-4—**Creation. Contact as below.** Airport Marriott, Burbank CA. Creations are commercial media events; many actors present.

9-11—**KatCon.** [beneluxcon.nl](http://beneluxcon.nl). Hotel Noordzee, Katwijk. Gwyneth Jones/Anne Helam, Jan J. B. Kuipers. Low countries' annual SF con.

10-11—**Creation.** [creationent.com](http://creationent.com). Sheraton Imperial. Raleigh-Durham, NC. Commercial media event. See the description above.

16-18—**LunaCon, Box 432, Bronx NY 10465.** [lunacon.org](http://lunacon.org). Rye Brook NY. John Ringo, Howard Tayler, T. Pierce, A. & K. Looney.

16-18—**RevelCon, Box 6924, Houston TX 77265.** [severalunlimited.com](http://severalunlimited.com). "The Little Con with the Texas Size Heart." Ages 16 up.

16-18—**FantaSciCon, 395 Stancil Rd., Rossville GA 30741.** [fantascicon.com](http://fantascicon.com). Howard Johnson Plaza, Chattanooga TN.

16-18—**OmniCon, Box 5624, Cookeville TN 38505.** [omnicon.us](http://omnicon.us). Tennessee Tech University, Cookeville TN. Multi-genre. Much gaming.

16-18—**Anime Conji.** [animeconji.org](http://animeconji.org). Town & Country Resort, San Diego CA. Anime and manga. This year's theme: "Matsuri."

23-25—**MidSouthCon, Box 17724, Memphis TN 38187.** [midsouthcon.org](http://midsouthcon.org). Hilton. M. Stackpole, S. C. Gilberts, E. Siegel, J. Corroney.

29-Apr. 1—**World Horror Con.** [whc2012.org](http://whc2012.org). Salt Lake City UT. Sherrilyn Kenyon, Mike Mignola, P. N. Elrod. Stoker awards.

30-Apr. 1—**ICon, Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790.** [iconf.org](http://iconf.org). NY State U. "Easy Coast's Largest Con of SF, Fact and Fantasy."

30-Apr. 1—**ConBust.** [sophia.smith.edu/conburst](http://sophia.smith.edu/conburst). Smith College, Northampton MA. SF, fantasy and feminism.

30-Apr. 1—**ConTact.** [contact-conference.org](http://contact-conference.org). Domain, Sunnyvale CA. Conference on the possibilities of intelligent life in space.

30-Apr. 1—**Anime Detour, Box 48309, Minneapolis MN 55448.** [animedetour.com](http://animedetour.com). Doubletree, Bloomington MN. C. & G. Ayres, Grella.

## APRIL 2012

6-8—**MiniCon, Box 8297, Minneapolis MN 55408.** [mnstf.org](http://mnstf.org). Bloomington MN. F. & B. Wu, T. Chiang, C. J. Garcia. SF and fantasy.

6-8—**MarCon, Box 141414, Columbus OH 43214.** [marcon.org](http://marcon.org). T. Pierce, P. Guran, K. Gass, B. Leeper, E. Neely. "Galactic Beach Party."

6-8—**LepreCon, Box 26665, Tempe AZ 85285.** [leprecon.org](http://leprecon.org). Mission Palms. Franchesco!, Joe Haldeman. Emphasis on SF/fantasy art.

6-8—**NorwesCon, Box 68547, Seattle WA 98168.** (206) 230-7850. [norwescon.org](http://norwescon.org). Seattle WA. Many authors attend.

6-8—**Anime Boston, Box 1843, New York NY 10150.** [animeboston.com](http://animeboston.com). Hynes Convention Center, Boston MA. Big anime event.

6-9—**UK Nat'l. Con, c/o Medany, 4 Eversham Green, Aylesbury Bucks.** HP19 9RX, UK. [olympus2012.org.uk](http://olympus2012.org.uk). Radisson, Heathrow.

13-15—**RavenCon, Box 36420, Richmond VA 23235.** [ravencon.com](http://ravencon.com). Holiday Inn Koger Center. Glen Cook, Matthew Stewart.

13-15—**Ad Astra, Box 7276, Toronto ON M5W 1X9.** [ad-astra.org](http://ad-astra.org). Toronto ON. Bova, Pierce, Lackey, Datlow, Hartwell, Edelman.

13-15—**ConStellation.** [constellationne.net](http://constellationne.net). Facebook: **ConStellation Nebraska.** Lincoln NE. E. Bear, artist W. J. Hodgson, R. Vick.

14-15—**Hal-Con.** [hal-con.net](http://hal-con.net). [contact-hal@hal-con.net](mailto:contact-hal@hal-con.net). Port Opening Memorial Hall, Yokohama Japan. Alastair Reynolds.

20-22—**OdysseyCon, Box 7114, Madison WI 53707.** (608) 772-4455. [oddcon.com](http://oddcon.com). Larry Niven, Steven Barnes, gamer Kenneth Hite.

20-22—**JordanCon, c/o Box 767353, Roswell GA 30076.** [ageoflegends.net](http://ageoflegends.net). M. R. Kowal, Sam Weber. The works of Robert Jordan.

20-22—**Corflu.** [corflu2012.org](http://corflu2012.org). Las Vegas NV. Celebrating the traditions of fanzine fandom, old and new.

## AUGUST 2012

30-Sep. 3—**Chicon 7, Box 13, Skokie IL 60076.** [chicon.org](http://chicon.org). Chicago IL. Resnick, Morrill, Musgrave, Scalzi. WorldCon. \$195.

## AUGUST 2013

29-Sep. 2—**Lone Star Con 3, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755.** [lonestarcon3.org](http://lonestarcon3.org). San Antonio TX. The World SF Convention. \$160+.

# INTRODUCING!

# PuzzleNation™

A new online community  
for puzzle lovers!

Featuring smart **new** games  
based on your favorite  
puzzles from Penny Press®  
and Dell Magazines.

**[puzzlenation.com](http://puzzlenation.com)**

# Explore the Universe!

Visit [www.analogsf.com](http://www.analogsf.com)  
&  
[www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com)

**Home of the world's leading  
Science Fiction magazines**



**Log on and enjoy:**

**Award-nominated stories  
from the genre's leading authors**



**Readers' Forum**



**Excerpts of current stories**



**SF news and events**



**Book reviews**

**Asimov's** **ANALOG**  
SCIENCE FICTION SCIENCE FICTION AND FACT